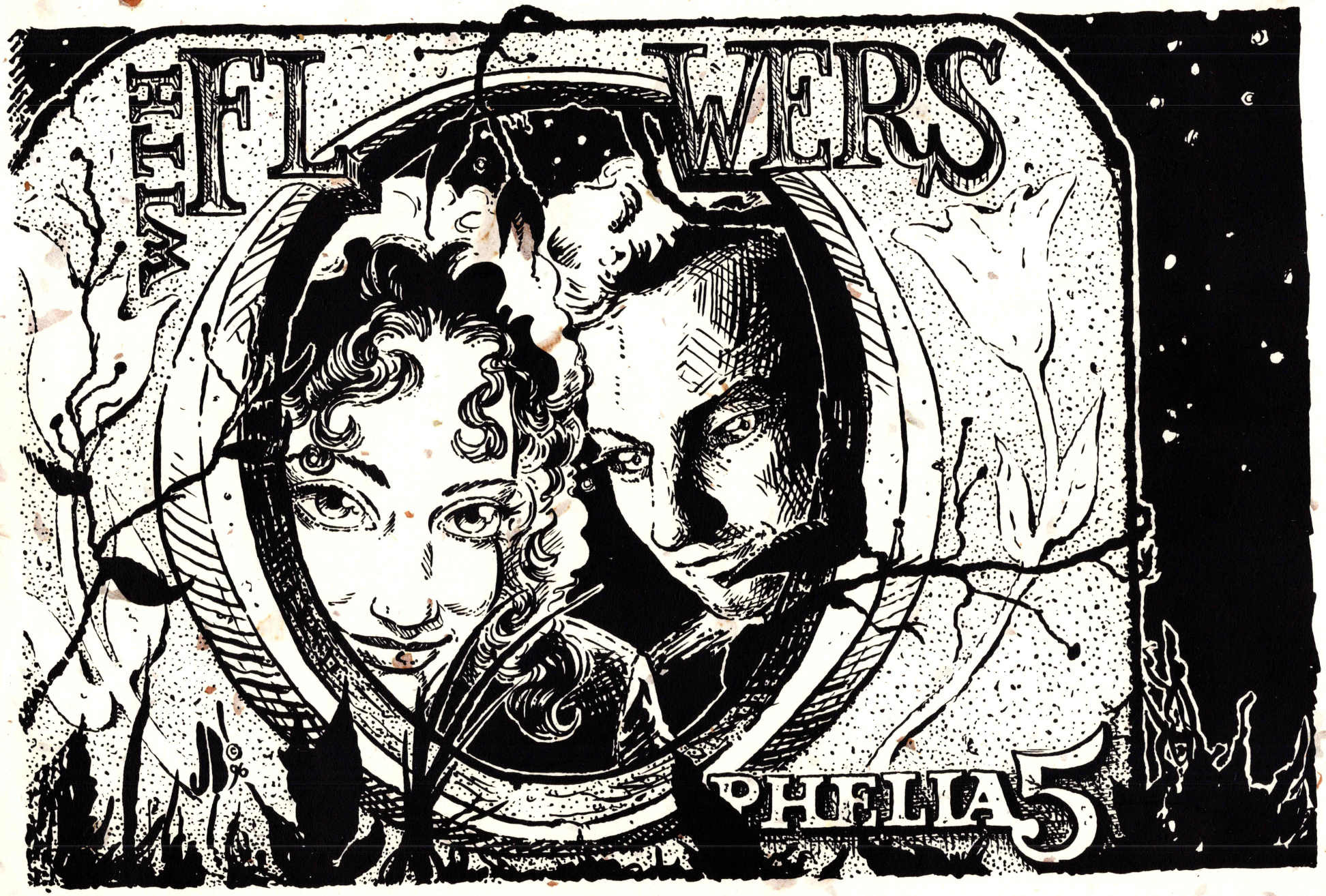
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With Flowers

AN ODD AND EROTIC ACCOUNTING OF THE ROMANCE BETWEEN A CORONER AND A VAMPIRE HOMICIDE DETECTIVE

Physical Therapy 2

What Love Endures 20

Taking Care 60

Lead Us Not Into Temptation 80

To Err Is Human 96

Text by Ophelia Paradise

Artwork by Johnny Bago

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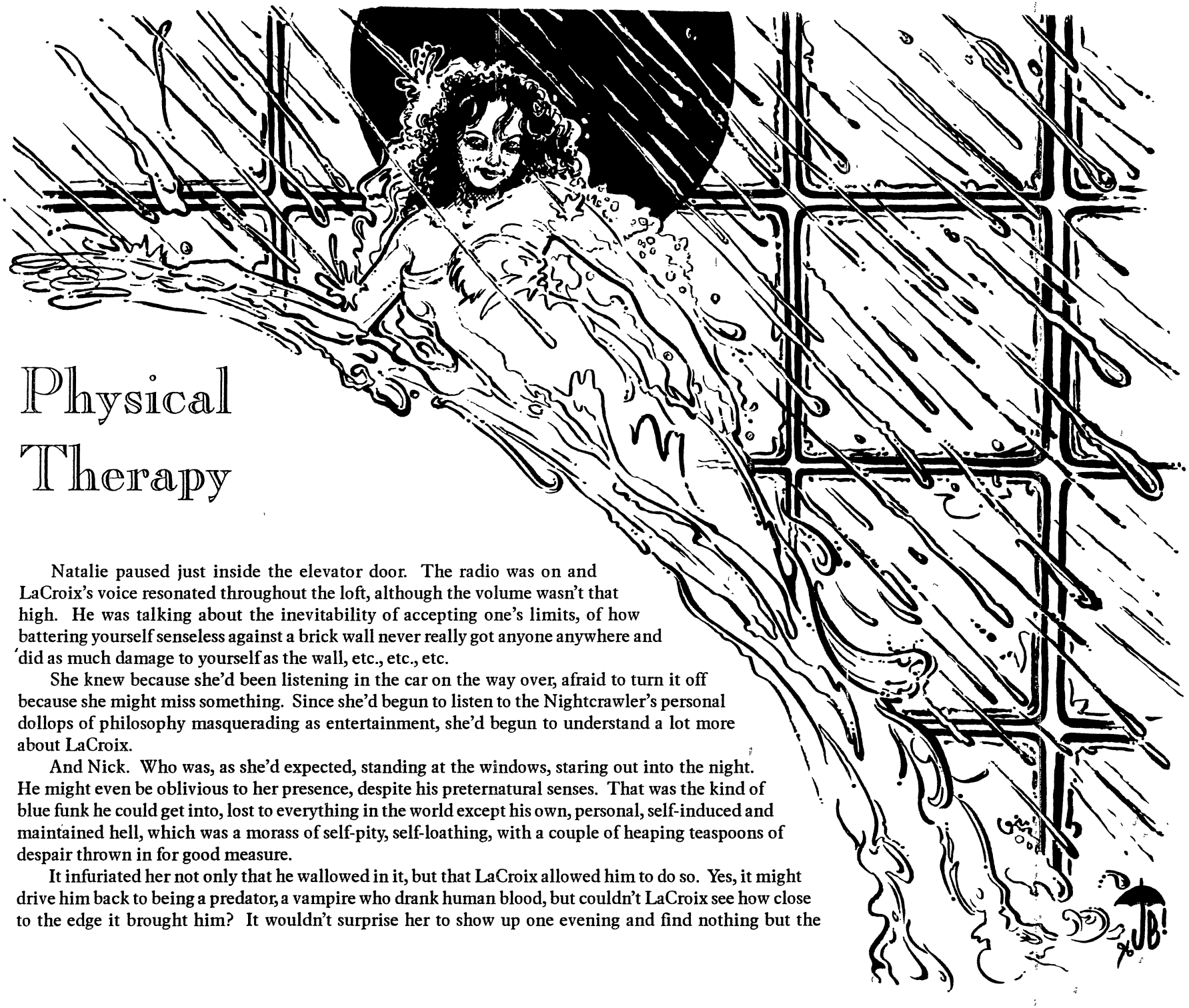


Physical Therapy

Natalie paused just inside the elevator door. The radio was on and LaCroix's voice resonated throughout the loft, although the volume wasn't that high. He was talking about the inevitability of accepting one's limits, of how battering yourself senseless against a brick wall never really got anyone anywhere and did as much damage to yourself as the wall, etc., etc., etc.

She knew because she'd been listening in the car on the way over, afraid to turn it off because she might miss something. Since she'd begun to listen to the Nightcrawler's personal dollops of philosophy masquerading as entertainment, she'd begun to understand a lot more about LaCroix.

And Nick. Who was, as she'd expected, standing at the windows, staring out into the night. He might even be oblivious to her presence, despite his preternatural senses. That was the kind of blue funk he could get into, lost to everything in the world except his own, personal, self-induced and maintained hell, which was a morass of self-pity, self-loathing, with a couple of heaping teaspoons of despair thrown in for good measure.

It infuriated her not only that he wallowed in it, but that LaCroix allowed him to do so. Yes, it might drive him back to being a predator, a vampire who drank human blood, but couldn't LaCroix see how close to the edge it brought him? It wouldn't surprise her to show up one evening and find nothing but the

windows wide open and a pile of ash on the floor, the radio still on and tuned to CERK, all audio self-flagellation, all the time.

The image scared her and stoked up her anger enough to send her stalking across the room. Nick turned, watching her with casual interest, but she ignored him. She half-expected to find him at the entertainment unit before she got there and was almost surprised when she twisted the knob haphazardly to another station, then cut off the power to the unit.

The discordant strains of a country guitar solo still hung on the air when she turned to face him . . . but Nick was looking out the window again, hands clasped behind his back. Her feelings warred within her—anger that he was hurting himself and that LaCroix was helping him, pain that he *was* hurting, and hope that she could do something about it. It was becoming a vicious circle, sending her round and round on the same track, over and again. Lately, she'd begun to think there might be something more. Since Valentine's Day, Nick had pushed her away, set up a glass wall between them, thin enough for sound to pass through, but little else. He'd maintained that distance, increasing it day by day, as if weaning himself off her, as if making certain that without her there, he'd still be alive, that the world would still continue.

It was to 'protect' her. She knew that what had almost happened to her at the restaurant had frightened him almost as much as it had frightened her. She'd been barely conscious through his little drama, when he'd held her in his arms, played with her as if she were a doll, toyed with her as if she were merely a puppet, a pawn . . . and then held her tightly and desperately when LaCroix had finally left, without calling Nick's bluff. Better not to think about the hungers his touch and play-acting had stirred within her, the feelings that she'd only let rise to the surface once Nick had decided that it would be all right for them to try to test the limits of his control. Whether he could control the vampire within him had no longer been important, it was the other part of him—the human part—that hadn't been able to deny or curb his feelings for her. Trust LaCroix to have so royally screwed it up that she'd begun to think that she'd lost Nick entirely, even as a friend.

The rattle of the brown paper shopping bag she carried and her footsteps were the only sounds as she walked across the room toward him. She'd almost given up . . . and then they'd needed each other more than ever after Schanke and Cohen had been killed. Was it the death of their friends that had suddenly reversed the slide apart? Janette's having hied off to greener pastures couldn't have hurt. They'd needed each other, found their friendship again, dabbled at the edges of something deeper than friendship . . . to the point when *she'd* started listening to LaCroix and her own inner fears. Nick had finally found the courage to admit that he cared for her, that he more than cared for her.

Then the worst of it had returned. She still wasn't certain what had happened to him, but it was like he'd suddenly rediscovered everything he hated about what he was and what he'd been. The self-loathing consumed him and, after having grown fond of the closeness they were developing, she was suddenly out in the cold, at arm's length to be 'protected' again.

"Not this time," she whispered to herself. This time she wouldn't let it go on for so long. She couldn't endure that again, the slow slide into professional formality that would end with one of them leaving Toronto with nothing more than a handshake and a half-hearted, never-to-be-kept promise to 'keep in touch.'

Nick turned, the barest smile on his lips. "What's 'not this time'?"

His eyes were sad, almost unbearably so, despite the joking tone in his voice. Natalie shut down some part of her that still cringed at the thought of what she was about to do—let's face it, there was a certain amount of pride, puritanical leftovers, and some squeamishness that she still hadn't dealt with, not to mention the questions about self-worth, mental health, etc.—and said, "You're not pushing me away this time."

The sadness deepened, his eyes taking on a shade that was somewhere between the color of what she thought the Caribbean might look like in full sunshine and a brilliant cobalt blue. "I don't want to push you away."

"You're afraid of hurting me." She dropped the shopping bag to the floor to punctuate her comment and it did, with a metallic clank and a thud.

The sound caused a raised eyebrow and caught his interest, but then Nick met her gaze again. "Well, it's only a matter of time, isn't it? One way or another, everything I do seems to hurt you."

There were two ways to handle that problem—protest bitterly and at length about how wrong he was, which would open doors to a whole truckload of other issues that neither one of them was capable of dealing with just then or . . . .

She kissed him. Walked straight up to him and kissed him. Full on the lips, nothing stirring or sensual, just for the shock effect.

It worked. Nick seemed surprised—it did her heart good that he was 800 years old and she could *still* surprise him—and more than a little taken aback as she glared, adding, "*That* didn't hurt me."

He swallowed, but didn't move away. They were inches from one another; she knew he could hear her heartbeat quite clearly. "I didn't do that. You did."

"Then *you* try it. Come on. I dare you."

"Nat—"

It was that long suffering tone of voice. That 'you can't understand, you're

only mortal, it's never going to work, oh why don't I just curl up into a ball and die' voice.

But she wasn't budging and she wasn't giving him a way out. "Chicken?"

"Nat—"

She leaned forward and gave him another smack on the lips—a little more spit this time, but still platonic. "Chicken," she announced afterwards. "You are a one-hundred percent, bonafied, complete and total—"

She didn't get a chance to finish the accusation—he caught her with her mouth open. Whether it was intentional or not, she didn't really need to know, although she filed it away for later thought. It was more than a platonic smack. His hand moved behind her head, buried deep into her hair, fingers toying but not quite pulling and definitely not hurting. Some mouth suction was involved, a quick nibble on the lips and corner of her mouth, a slight teasing darting of his tongue—

That was it. Nick pulled back, hand still in her hair, eyes blue, lips fighting to hold an indignant, defiant pose and tending to curl instead—thank God, his sense of humor had finally kicked in! "Satisfied?"

Her mouth was still open—damn, he'd caught her by surprise, the sneak!—and her toes were just starting to unclench. But she wasn't about to tell him that. "Hardly."

A raised eyebrow and he moved in again. It was all in fun, she could see it in his attitude, in the lightness of his eyes, the laughter hidden there. He could let himself do this, enjoy this, because it wasn't serious. It wasn't going anywhere.

The hell it wasn't! This time, when he thought he'd caught her off-guard, he'd misjudged her. He wasn't the only one who could suck and nibble. When Nick tried to pull away, she went after him, maintaining the contact, lips to lips. It didn't take much to tempt him back into action. At some point, his other hand moved to her hair, then down to the small of her back, pressing her against him. The hand in her hair changed position, shifted, toyed with the strands, while Natalie slipped her hands around his neck to draw him closer. Eventually she had to call time, take a break to breathe.

"No," whispered Nick. He didn't pull away, or push away for that matter—in fact, she'd managed to push *him* back against the window. "Nat—we can't. Not now—"

Her first answer, 'Then *when*?' was never spoken. She didn't dare, because it led to other questions, other things that he would use to hold them apart. "Yes, now," she told him softly. She raised her hand from his neck and ran the tips of her fingers along his cheek as he turned his gaze to the ceiling, the skylight, as if searching for strength or control, or an answer. "*Especially* now."

"I told you—it's harder now. I might forget myself. I might—" He gazed into her eyes and she saw the fear in him and his desperate need to instill the same fear in her. "I might kill you."

"You didn't when you were possessed." She forced a smile. "You *didn't* kill me. You told me that you had absolutely no control over what you were doing, and you *still* didn't kill me."

"I . . . didn't," he whispered, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him before. And then the shutters fell into place again, the locks were set—"But I can't take the chance."

It was so hard to fight with him when her safety, a very real concern, was the argument. How could she fault him for not wanting to hurt her—other than the whole control issue, and that was something else entirely.

He took her silence for assent, his hands moving to her shoulders as he leaned forward and stole a quick, chaste kiss. "I don't *dare* take the chance."

"You won't have to." She matched his peck on her lips with one just as chaste . . . well, almost. Her arm slid from around his neck and she turned her back to him as she walked back to the black leather chair . . . and the shopping bag she'd set down beside it. "I've been thinking."

Intrigued, he followed her, sitting down on the couch across from her and leaning forward slightly. "Have you?"

"I know—I'll try not to make it a habit." A quick raise of his eyebrows and a grin—good, his sense of humor was still intact. She wondered how long it would last. "I've been thinking about your problem—*our* problem. It's based on fear, right?"

"Right," agreed Nick hesitantly, after a pause.

"Well, I think I've found a solution. Or . . . let's call it a promising line of research."

He tensed at her words. "You've found something to make me mortal."

"No." Better to knock that off right away, although Natalie was wounded by the sudden despair that fell across his features at her admission. "But I was thinking . . . what if we found a way to . . . be together . . . and there wouldn't be any danger. To either of us."

Eyes narrowing, Nick growled, "No. I won't bring you across—"

"Not *that*." Her voice was just as sharp and twice as nasty, letting him know in no uncertain terms that becoming a vampire wasn't part of her plan. Nick blinked in surprise, then his brow furrowed. She could see that he was completely in the dark, literally and figuratively.

Which was where she wanted him. And, she licked her lips in memory of that surprise assault of a moment ago, where hopefully he would want her. She cleared her throat, suddenly feeling a little warm and knowing that her

face must be flushed. "Okay, let's try another direction. You can't control the vampire, correct? The urge to bite and kill?"

The brutality of the words flitted across his features, followed by embarrassment and despair again. "I try, but—"

"I know. And I think we might be able to control it, in time, with behavior modification." Natalie clasped her hands together in her lap, not daring to look at him. "If we go under the assumption that it's instinct—well, there's probably not much we can do. But if we assume that it's a learned behavior, that we can 'unlearn' the behavior—"

"How?"

He could be bright upon occasion, usually when it had something to do with a cure of one sort or another and this time was proving to be no exception. "Trial and error. Repetition."

"Nat—I'd kill you. We know that."

"Maybe not. But . . . I don't want to take any chances either." She pushed the shopping bag over to him with her foot. "Believe me. I've been working on this angle for a couple of days now. And I think I've got the answer." She cleared her throat again as Nick bent down to check out the contents of the large shopping bag—she had to get past this bit in a hurry. "The problem is strength and speed—you're just too strong and too fast for me. So, I thought that maybe if we tilted the odds in my favor, gave me a physical edge on the situation, it might help you with the whole control issue."

Nick fished out the length of chain, which was attached to a padded iron wrist cuff with a bolt lock. He simply stared at it in wonder, as if he couldn't quite figure out what it was for.

Natalie hoped like hell he was still listening. She now *knew* that her face was flushed and that she was speaking too fast . . . but there was no way she was going to explain this again. "We start with an absolutely secure situation—we make you completely immobile . . . within reason. If that works, once you're comfortable with it and you think you're ready to move on—"

He had the leg cuffs out of the bag, now.

"—We change the parameters, give you some mobility, a little at a time. I'm not saying that it's going to happen overnight. But I think it might help your self-confidence, give you something to work toward. And I need to collect data. To be honest, I really know nothing about vampire intercourse, where blood fits into it, is it simply a holdover from the predator instincts or—?"

Nick was playing with the catch on the neck band, which was an iron collar padded on the inside.

"—Whether it's necessary for you to achieve—God, I can't believe I'm actually *talking* about this!" Her courage gave out just as he looked up at her and met her eyes. Natalie snatched the iron collar from his hand and tossed it into the bag. Without hesitation, she gathered together the handles of the bag, picked it up, and turned toward the door.

She was an idiot. How could she have done this? She was a rational woman. It wasn't like she *needed* sex, for God's sake, and, yeah, sure, she missed it and had fantasized more than once about how she and Nick would do together if she found a cure and *if* he was still interested in her and if—

But now she just felt cheap and vulgar and embarrassed, and needy and—

His arm was around her, stopping her from leaving. Nick pried the shopping bag handles from her fingers and the bag clanked on the floor again, falling sideways and spilling the contents.

Natalie didn't have time to notice. Nick's hands moved to her shoulders, then her face. He gazed into her eyes and kissed her—no attack this time. No intention to tease or taunt or challenge. Just a long, slow, loving, caring, caressing kind of kiss.

There was no breath left in her body when he finished and Natalie was *very* glad that Nick had his arms around her—about forty-five seconds into the kiss she'd dimly recognized that her knees had spontaneously turned to Jell-O and that she'd have fallen on her ass without his support.

"No one," he whispered softly, "has *ever* cared enough about me to even . . . ."

He was at a loss for words and—God, were those tears in his eyes? She hoped not, because if he started crying, she'd start crying and the hell with that because she wanted to go back to round two of that kiss. She settled, however, for a smaller, shorter version; a 'you're welcome' to his 'thank you.'

"Well?" she asked, once she'd regained some stability in her knees. "What do you think?"

Nick released her and knelt down. He tipped the spilled chains and cuffs into the shopping bag, then ran a length of chain through his fingers. "It might work. I'd have to be certain that these could hold me."

"They're single piece work—no joins on the cuffs or the neck collar, so they won't snap. The bolts would hold them closed. I think if you can fasten most of the bolts, I can tighten the last one with a wrench—"

"Kind of puts a damper on the mood, doesn't it?" He shook his head and she caught sight of his grin. "Where did you *get* all this stuff?"

"Don't ask." Grinning back and shuddering slightly, she leaned down and whispered, "There are a few skeletons in the morgue closets that you *don't* want to know about and I'm certainly not going to dig into. Any more than I have already, that is." Natalie knelt down beside him and picked up one of the bolt clamps at the other end of the cuffs. "There's a metal cross beam in

here that's bolted together—the more you pull on it, the tighter it gets. If we slip that under your bed—"

"My . . . bed?"

"Sure." She hesitated at the lost look in his eyes. "I want you comfortable. You need something familiar. And with all this *stuff* involved, the more familiar the surroundings, the more at ease you'll be and the better chance this has of working." Natalie picked up the edge of the chain and pieced the clamp and the chain together. "Like this. Leg chains and wrist chains—we pull them taut at first, with no give, then ease up when you feel you have more control. The neck clamp will hold your head down, so there's no chance that you could . . . ."

"That I could bite you." Nick sobered suddenly and picked up the metal collar. "Nat—are you sure you want to risk this. It's . . . it's only metal. Metal can give or break."

"Believe me, I've had it checked out. The risk factor is minimal—that's the only reason I'm even suggesting this." She placed her hands over his. "The question is, are you comfortable with this? It's just so—"

"Kinky?" He grinned as shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know. It's certainly . . . different. You?"

"It's a little bit beyond my realm of experience," she admitted, picking up one of chains. "Hell—it's *way* beyond my experience. And there are some drawbacks. It limits our options, right off the bat. The whole purpose of this thing is to limit your movement, which means I'll be in control . . . at least, for the first couple of sessions." She swallowed, realizing what she'd said, then felt his hand steal over and around her own. Natalie looked up at Nick, part of her being the very detached doctor and the other being the woman who wanted him, but not in a situation that would cost him a part of himself. "I'm not a psychologist, so I'm not going to begin to predict how this will work out. But I know we're both going to have to deal with a lot of tough things here. Some of them might not be pretty."

His hand closed a bit more tightly on hers and he nodded seriously. Somehow, he was managing to avoid condescension and intimidation. "Why don't—?" His voice faltered as he met her eyes. "If we're careful— If we're honest with each other— If something doesn't feel right, we stop. That has to be our second ground rule. The first is that I won't do *anything* that puts you at risk . . . more than you already are."

He was on the verge of backing out; she could see the hesitation in his eyes and knew it was for fear of what he might do to her. Natalie glared back at him. "All right. Then the honesty starts now. I'm scared—I'll admit it. This whole thing is . . . just too bizarre for words. But I think I've found an answer for us. I've taken every precaution I can think of to ensure my own safety. If that's not good enough for you, then we don't go through with this."

For that instant, hearing her own voice, *she* considered backing out. Not out of fear for her safety . . . but fear of the unknown. She thought she could handle it, that if she made it sound clinical and cold enough, gave the experiment parameters and goals, it would be all right. It was awkward enough making love with a relative stranger—and no matter how long you'd known someone or how well, there was usually that odd moment when you realized that you were both naked and this was your first time together and whether it happened again or not the first time between you could only really happen once and that you really *were* strangers. This would change so many things between them, end some and start others. Was she ready for this?

Nick raised her knuckles to his lips, kissing them lightly, his eyes still fixed on hers. "Have I told you how beautiful you look?"

"Beautiful?" She glanced down at the navy sweats she'd thrown on as she'd run out of her apartment. "In these?"

"In anything." He leaned forward to kiss her—just the barest meeting of lips. "In nothing." Another kiss. "I'd like nothing more in the world right now than to love you, Natalie Lambert. All of you. Completely. If you'll let me."

Romance wasn't dead. Not totally. Occasionally, it assumed the form of an 800-year-old vampire who seemed at a loss for the right thing to say 99% of the time, but that one percent proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that romance lived on. It seemed a shame to break the mood.

But pragmatism won. Natalie reached down and picked up one of the chains, adding, "Then we've got some hardware to install."

One more quick kiss, then Nick grinned. He rose to his feet, grabbed her hand and pulled her up beside him. It was a temptation to hang on, but she let her fingers slide from his. In this one thing they were perfectly in accord—she marched directly to the bedroom while he gathered tools from the kitchen.

It took close to two hours to assemble the struts and fasten the bolts to Nick's satisfaction. He pulled on each chain with all of his strength, mouth set in a grim line, until he finally relented and moved on to the next. Natalie helped as best she could—she'd tested the pieces after purchasing them and before bringing them over, knowing that she didn't want to face the fiasco of proposing such an endeavor, having Nick accept . . . and them being one screw short of being able to put this experiment to bed. She could have assembled the thing in her sleep.

She also knew why Nick had to put it together, why he had to test and retest the strength of each bolt and connection. He needed to put his fears to

rest, or at least ease them. Watching how carefully he worked, she wondered again if she was doing the right thing, if maybe she should have brought up the idea in some other way, set up some schedule so they could get used to it, not rush headlong into this. She was putting tremendous pressure on Nick when all she really wanted was to release some of the pressure he'd been putting on himself, give him hope when he had none.

He'd stop after each piece, shift this way or that around or beneath the bed, ask for a tool . . . and then smile at her. A few times he'd kissed her fingers, the palm of her hand, and once had reached out, drawn her to him, and kissed her so completely and thoroughly that she'd been convinced that her toenails had loosened and were about to fall off.

After that last one, he'd closed his eyes and kept them closed, pulling on the chain that held the collar beneath the headboard with such an effort that she saw the muscles bulge in his shoulder through his shirt, which was now plastered to him by reddening, wet sweat stains. If Nick had to be sure, she'd let him be sure.

But how sure was she? And how sure could she be?

"It's good," he announced, dropping the chain and collar, then taking a deep breath. "It should hold."

"It *will* hold."

Nick fell back onto the bed, cushioning his head with his arms, and looked up at her with a searching gaze. "Nat, are you sure—?"

"I trust you."

"*I* don't trust me."

She put her fist against his side, punching him lightly, then made a face as she drew close. "If you think I'm going anywhere near you with you smelling like that, you've got another think coming, buddy."

Wearing a wounded look, Nick sat up. "Do I offend?"

"In the worst possible way." Natalie climbed off the bed and walked over to his robe and pajamas, which were draped over a chair. Rolling them up into a ball, she threw them at him. "Hit the showers, mister."

"Am I taking orders from you now?" He rose to his feet, clasping the pajamas and robe against his chest, and grinned.

"If you know what's good for you—"

"I do—*you're* good for me." He leaned forward into a kiss, teasing the edges of her mouth, then pulled away. "Hold that thought—"

For a moment she simply stood there, charmed by his ability to move from tease to tiger and back again—although there were other circumstances when it annoyed the hell out of her.

That's when the cold sweats hit.

Natalie turned, caught sight of herself in the mirror—and stopped. Her hair was a mess and she was dotted with dust bunnies from having helped Nick assemble the restraints on the bed . . . she'd discovered the one place his usually immaculate cleaning service seemed to have missed. The navy sweats she was wearing were anything but romantic and just slightly more appealing than the extremely boring lingerie she'd thrown on when she'd dashed out of her apartment before she could lose her nerve.

She'd wanted this to be perfect, had thought she'd prepared for everything . . . and now she had nothing to almost wear!

Turning, she caught sight of Nick's dresser. He had another pair of black silk pajamas in there. She could easily be wearing them when he exited his shower . . . . Then she caught sight of the bathrobe she'd left when she'd been Nick's houseguest and resident medical caretaker after his head injury. Picking it up, Natalie clutched the terrycloth against herself. Why wear anything? Simply throw on the robe and be ready for him—

And what would he think of her when he finally saw her? What *could* he think, when she looked like this? Perfect, she'd wanted this perfect . . . and there'd still be that awkwardness as they stared and tried not to stare, wanting to see and know everything and yet being in a situation that was so utterly bizarre that the lack of clothing would just add to the feeling of unease. She'd tried so hard to make this all seem natural, to find a setting in which Nick could at least be comfortable, where it wouldn't seem so unusual that they were naked and alone together.

The sound of the water kicking in as he turned on the shower broke through her reverie. Natalie quickly stripped off her sweat pants and shirt, tossing them on a chair, then followed that with her bra and panties. There was no time to shiver because she shrugged into her bathrobe almost immediately and remembered, on her way out the bedroom door, to stop in the hall and turn up the heat.

He hadn't locked the bathroom door—then again, she hadn't expected him to. Nick was used to living alone, not accustomed to having someone else around to invade his privacy. She hesitated, her hand on the door, and thought about what she planned to do. How better to initiate the proceedings than to start in a place where they were used to being naked, although—admittedly—not together. Should she knock?

Deciding that barging in might be the best tactic, Natalie opened the door slightly and peered into the bathroom. It was foggy and the air was moist with steam. She swallowed, then opened the door enough to slip inside, closing it behind her.

The tile was cold against her bare feet. Nick hadn't noticed her presence

yet—the shower door was already semi-opaque and fogged over. She cleared her throat.

There was a thud and she saw him stop—he'd dropped the soap in surprise. The palm of a hand appeared against the door, then he opened it slightly, peering out in an almost frightened bewilderment. "Nat—?"

"I'm covered with dust-bunnies. Mind if I jump in real quick and hose them off?"

Nick blinked at her, most of his hair plastered to his head. Beads of water covered his face and one driblet ran unnoticed down his cheek. He swallowed. "Do you think . . . that's a good idea?"

Her heart pounded in her chest, but she maintained the forced smile. "Oh, yeah, sure—you get to be all nice and clean and I stay covered with gunk?" Recognizing the fear in his eyes, she walked toward him, her smile softening of its own accord as she reached out and touched his cheek, cupping it in her palm and wiping away the dripping water. "Yes, it's a good idea. Think of it as 'show-and-tell.' Like we agreed, we take it slow. Unless . . . it's a problem?"

Much as she hated to, Natalie knew she had to give him that out. They had to start this thing with utter and complete trust and how better to show him how much she trusted him to be naked and unarmed with reach of fangs and claws. But if he couldn't handle it, it was better to know that now, before things got far beyond the ability of either of them to control the situation.

He stood there, fingers clenched around the edge of the shower door, dripping—for a moment she was afraid he was going to crush the aluminum. Then a slow smile appeared and he said, "I get the soap first?"

"It's your shower."

Nick stepped back behind the shower door and opened it to let her enter.

Cheat! She couldn't see anything yet! And she knew that he was just tall enough to see over the bar at the top of the shower stall, so he'd have a free show.

Deciding to let him make the most of it, Natalie shrugged off the robe almost disdainfully, then ducked into the shower. She stood beneath the full force of the spray and concentrated on the tingling of the hot water as it struck her bare and chilled skin. Thankfully, Nick hadn't turned it up too high and it wasn't so hot that it would burn her, just nice enough to soothe aching muscles.

She was aware of him standing close and yet not touching, his eyes on her. Well, let him look! She had nothing of which to be ashamed. Fighting back the waves of self-consciousness that threatened to overwhelm her, she turned suddenly to face him. "Soap?" she asked.

He blinked, his eyes moving quickly up to meet hers, his expression that of a schoolboy caught outside a peephole into a girl's locker room. "Uh—what?"

"Are you done with the soap?"

"I dropped it. Here—" He leaned down to pick up the soap.

Her eyes naturally followed the movement . . . and she remembered that the intent was not only to make him feel comfortable with the idea of her being naked, but to introduce her to him in that all-too-natural state. In patching him up over time she'd seen bits and pieces of him, of course. His chest was familiar territory; she was looking forward to a less casual, tactile exploration of the area. She'd never seen him in shorts, although she'd had to rip off a pantleg or two in the past to dig a slug out of his thigh when he'd been just a tad slow ducking a bullet, so the shape and musculature of the legs were no surprise, either. She still wasn't certain what vampirism did to a mortal body brought across, but she was beginning to thank her lucky stars that he'd been a horseman in his day, if the brief view of his posterior was anything to go by. As for the other equipment . . . .

Another brief glimpse. No real surprises there, though. She'd seen him asleep on the couch wearing his pajamas, one of the nice things about black silk being its tendency to cling. Her imagination had filled in the not-so-gory details and, actually, hadn't been that far off . . . it was only now she'd realized that she'd underestimated him slightly and should have given him the benefit of the doubt. He wasn't showing any real signs of arousal—quite the contrary. Which was understandable—he was embarrassed as hell, but curious about her body and feeling guilty because of it, to boot.

As he rose, she let her eyes linger on his physique, watching the play of muscles as he moved. Not quite a god, but a damned fine specimen, she had to admit. His gaze was hesitant, half-terrified and half-appalled, she wasn't certain whether it was at the brazenness of her behavior or the fact that he'd been comfortable enough to forget exactly where they were and what was going on.

Unlike him, Natalie didn't hide the fact that she was looking. Her smile was appreciative as she held out her hand. Nick placed the soap directly into her palm without speaking and before he could work up the nerve, she turned and moved beneath the spray of water again.

She felt him watching again as she worked up a lather with the soap between her hands, the sting of it making her nostrils smart. She ran the bar along her shoulders, down her breasts, lathering as if he weren't even there. Although the knowledge that he was so close, the memory of those muscled limbs and that body just behind her set something deep within her aching. She'd started to rinse off when she felt a light touch on her left shoulder.

Turning, she smiled inquiringly. Nick held out his hand for the soap, saying, "Allow me."

She handed him the soap, still not quite understanding,. With a gentle pressure he turned her toward the spray again. There was an instant's pause, a soft sound as she heard him working up a lather of his own, then she felt his hands begin to soap down her shoulders.

Nick was washing her back. And doing it expertly, too . . . or at least it felt like a professional at work. His fingertips caressed the muscles of her shoulders, massaging through the suds, running the length of her shoulderblades and to the center of her back in an easy, continuous motion. Natalie felt her muscles ease up—God, she hadn't realized how tense she was!—and arched her back slightly, stretching. It felt absolutely wonderful.

His hands moved down her sides, fingers slipping beneath her arms, which she then moved away from her body just a bit. The fingertips stretched out, barely caressing the edges of her breasts as if he was assuring himself of their placement, before they moved to her back again. He moved closer as his hands drifted lower. His leg brushed up against hers, jerked away as if to tell her that it hadn't been intentional and then, when she didn't protest, was a solid presence against her.

Nick's touch grew more tentative as he reached her buttocks. Natalie thought he was going to chicken out but, after the barest hesitation, his hands were sliding across her flesh again. He was careful, finishing far too quickly for her taste, and moving up to her hips again. By accident he caught a ticklish spot and Natalie jumped, her body colliding with his.

The contact was quick, but it gave her an immediate update on the arousal situation—she was gratified to know she had that much of an effect on him, but beneath that was the concern of his control. Better to finish off this type of foreplay as soon as she could and move them to a more secure area.

Natalie took the soap from his hand, pushed Nick's shoulder to move him forward, and announced, "Your turn."

He grinned at her, then stood beneath the showerhead, ducking so that the water doused him thoroughly. Leaning his palms flat against the wall, he spread his legs apart slightly and said, "I suppose you want me to assume the position?"

The view wasn't bad and she was *very* tempted to frisk him for the hell of it. But knowing that she didn't want to push him too far, too soon, Natalie slapped his back lightly and said, "Maybe later."

His shoulders suddenly seemed broader than she'd thought they were. She rubbed the soap between her hands—noticed that it was shrinking away to nothing—then began to massage Nick's back much as he'd done hers. He bent his neck forward, interrupting the stream of water from the showerhead, so that a steady spray ran down his back. In seconds she had a nice set of lather from the soap and she made her way down the trapezius, to the deltoid, then to the latissumus dorsi, all the while marveling at the texture of his skin.

It wasn't soft, but was pliable and the soap skidded easily over it. She found herself looking for bullet wounds that she'd treated three years ago, the scars of which would still have been evident on the flesh of any mortal man. But Nick wasn't mortal. And his skin, even under the heat of the water, was slightly cold to the touch.

There *were* marks here and there that she couldn't identify—she gathered he'd gotten them before he'd been brought across into his state of undeath. One at his hip in particular fascinated her. Daydreaming, she wondered what kind of sword or weapon would have caused a laceration like that. Certainly it was unlike anything in use today and, having been a Toronto Coroner, she'd seen the results of a good number of the variety of weapons man had found to use against his fellow man . . . and woman.

Natalie reached upward to soap Nick's shoulders again, heard his slight intake of breath, then realized that her body was pressed against his. He'd drawn away into the spray from the shower at the contact, but stopped himself. Her leg brushed his, her breasts pressed against his back unconsciously as she felt her way around the musculature, examining old wounds more with a physician's eye than a lover's. When she ran her hand along his ribs, he let out a short cry—he was ticklish!

Now *this* was an opportunity she couldn't let pass. Natalie very lightly strummed the barest tips of her fingernails along the flesh just to the side of his ribcage.

The reaction was immediate and unexpected. Nick whirled, one arm to either side of her head, his body pressed against hers so that he all but pinned her to the wall. Before she could even begin to acknowledge her fear at the sudden movement—he'd moved too quickly for her to see—he'd leaned down and captured her mouth with his.

Her common sense was setting off more bells in her head than an eight-alarm blaze, but she ignored them. If Nick's skin was cool, his lips and mouth were warm. Dropping the soap, she slid her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him, as if skin-to-skin contact might somehow warm his flesh. The sound of the shower spray was drowned out by the thrumming of her heart in her ears and she closed her eyes, falling into the hunger of the kiss, devouring him with as much desperation and passion as that by which she felt herself being devoured.

Whether it was the press of her body against his or the intensity of the

kiss she wasn't certain, but she became aware that Nick was responding to her in a very forthright manner . . . which was currently trapped between them. His kiss moved to the line of her jaw, to her neck . . . .

And Natalie froze, her fingernails digging into the flesh of his shoulders as she realized that she was about to arch her neck and tilt her head to give him access to the artery. She stared over his shoulder, not daring to move, almost afraid to utter a sound. If she looked, she *knew* his eyes would be gold. And his teeth—

Nick also froze, barely a second after she did. He left hand was on her back, the fingers of his right hand paused on the line of her jaw, as if he were about to turn her head. That hand fell away and he was gone from the shower, leaving her chilled, dripping, and alone.

There wasn't time to be scared. Dammit, she didn't *want* to be scared, not with the memory of his touch still lingering on her skin, the taste of him still on her lips. She wanted to be kissed and held and cuddled and loved . . . *not* scared. So Natalie turned off the shower controls tightly, then opened the door wider and stepped out onto the cold tile.

It was like walking out into a cloud—the water had been so hot for so long that they were enveloped in a mist. Nick's silk bathrobe clung to him, which meant that he hadn't bothered to dry off . . . but neither had he run away. He stood at the sink and stared into the mirror. A clear swath revealed a partial reflection, indicating that he'd swiped it clean with the sleeve of his bathrobe or his palm, but it was already being reclaimed by the haze. He didn't seem to notice, simply staring into the glass, lips twisted into a snarl that was a combination of anger and disgust, as if he saw something he despised and loathed.

Perhaps he did. Natalie swallowed, bent to pick up her bathrobe, then shrugged into it, watching him all the while. This was wrong . . . she hadn't meant to send him deeper into despair. Nor had she meant to give herself and him such a scare. Was his hold on himself really so tenuous? Had her trust been misplaced? Was he right in that his battle with what he thought was a demon had pushed him past the ground they'd spent years reclaiming?

Was she unconsciously willing to surrender her soul and her life to him by giving him her blood?

She swallowed again, watching him as he watched his reflection. She'd been right—there were a lot of things they were going to have to deal with if they were going to get through this. Some of them were ugly.

And some of them were downright terrifying.

Finally, Nick bowed his head and raised a hand to his face, as if unable to look at her or the reflection any longer. "Go home, Nat," he whispered. "It's—I can't do this. Go home. Please . . . go home."

His voice was soft, but ragged and worn as if it cost him a part of his soul to even say the words. Her own fear drained away at the sight of him, at the sound of his voice, the heartbreak evident in each.

The question was, how best to deal with this? She'd promised him that either one of them could put a stop to it, if it became too difficult or dangerous . . . but to stop now, when they'd just begun, meant that they'd never get past this point again. They'd broken down several barriers in the past few hours, reached a point they never thought they'd ever be able to reach, and she was supposed to go home and be content with the memory that it happened this once and that was it?

The anger swelled within her chest. Natalie folded her arms, but bit her lip before she could say anything. He wouldn't respond to her anger, not the way he was feeling. To rail at Nick now would be like beating a wounded animal, senselessly cruel and possibly dangerous—it wouldn't do either of them any good and would leave him worse than when they'd begun.

"Go home," he repeated weakly.

"What? And let you catch your death of cold?" The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them, startling her.

Nick froze, then his head rose slowly, his eyes searching out her own in puzzlement. "I'm afraid that's . . . not an option."

"Don't tell me that. We know you've got an immune system from hell, but we—at least *I*—am well aware that there are dozens of little germs that must be looking for the right vampire to settle down in. You stand there much longer, you're going to be the hottest vampire virus condo site this side of the garbage dump."

His smile was faint, but it made her heart skip slightly just to see it. Making a show of it, Natalie picked up one of the large, fluffy bath towels, pointed at the closed lid of the commode, and said, "Sit."

She expected him to protest and so put on one of her sternest expressions, the one she usually used when Sidney had done an unmentionable in one of her open suitcases. It worked as well on woebegone vampires as it did on cats, because Nick sat down on the lid wearing a slightly amused, slightly dazed expression.

"First thing is your hair—it's waterlogged." Moving behind him, Natalie draped the towel over his head and began to rub vigorously, eliciting an yowl of protest which she ignored (she'd bathed Sydney often enough not to fall for *that* sound). "I think you've ruined your bathrobe. And . . . for God's sake, it *is* silk, isn't it? Nick, you should know better than that—that's for sitting around

in while you drink your coffee and read your paper in the morning, *not* for throwing on when you're fresh out of the shower and dripping wet!"

His voice was muffled, but mostly audible beneath the towel. "I don't—OW!—drink coffee."

Nick kept raising his hands to stop her massage of his scalp with the towel, but Natalie kept batting them away. "Well, maybe a dry-cleaner could take care of the water stains."

"Nat, I'll—OW! That's attached, you know!—I'll buy another—" He finally grabbed the towel from her, saying, "*Give* me that!"

"All right." Relinquishing the towel, Natalie leaned against the wall and tried to hide her smile as Nick draped the towel around his neck. She'd gotten most of the moisture out of his hair, but it was sticking up in places . . . and she was unable to hide her amusement at the sight of it.

He assumed a suspicious and petulant air as she started laughing lightly. "What?"

"Your hair. It's like—like someone plugged you in or something." She gasped between syllables in places, but finally managed to get all the words out in the right order. His expression was one of wounded dignity, which only set her laughing harder.

"Oh yeah?" Nick took the towel from around his neck and pulled it taut between his hands. "We'll see how *you* like it," he informed her in a lightly threatening tone, as he flipped the towel around itself, then snapped it at her.

"Ow! Nick! No you *don't*—" With a squeal, Natalie made a move that she hoped would take her over the toilet and out of his reach, but it was a small bathroom, the floor was wet, and he was fast. She jumped, she slipped—

And she was suspended in his arms, one of his hands beneath her knees, the other clasped tightly around her back and shoulder. There was silence for a moment, as they simply looked at one another. The fear was back in his eyes, which were so blessedly *blue*. In unison, their mouths moved toward one another, lips slightly parted, but hesitated, almost touching until their eyes met in accord.

His kiss was soft and tentative and tender, full of fear of breaking her and yet promising to treasure her. Natalie didn't press him, but yielded to the moment, reveling in the closeness. Her arms moved around his neck to take some of her weight off him and to draw their lips together.

It was only because she had to breath that they parted. He stared down into her eyes, features still touched by sorrow and bitter contrition. "All right?"

He wasn't asking about her falling on the slick floor just then. Natalie managed a slight smile and a nod for his benefit. "Okay. Guess we got a little carried away there, huh?"

"We got *more* than 'carried away.'" He swallowed, looking away for a moment. "I couldn't stop it. I couldn't help myself. You were just so . . . ."

The words trailed off and his eyes became distant. "*So*—?" prompted Natalie. "Come on, don't stop right in the middle of a compliment! I get few enough as it is."

"So . . . beautiful." He leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose. "So enchanting. Charming. Wonderful—"

Natalie threw back her head in an exaggerated gesture and her damp hair sent droplets of water scattering. "Tell me more," she intoned, in her best imitation of Tellulah Bankhead.

Nick pushed open the door with his foot and carried her into the hallway. "Wonderful—"

"You did that one."

"Okay." He frowned for a moment, then brightened. "How about 'gorgeous'?"

"Good." Natalie squinted her eyes as she thought. "But you can do better."

"Exquisite?" he asked, carrying her over to the bed. "Radiant? Ravishing?" Just as they reached it, Nick turned and half-lowered, half-dropped her to the bed. "And *heavy*."

"It's all water weight," commented Natalie archly. "You should pick me up sometime when I'm dry."

"I'll think about it."

He lowered himself to the bed next to her and turned on his side. His robe fell open, revealing a section of chest—his pectoralis major, actually. Her own robe was tightly closed. Nick reached across and ran his finger along the large terrycloth tie of her bathrobe. "Now, where was I before I was so rudely interrupted?"

"Saying something about wanting to ravish me, I think." Natalie batted her eyelashes at him in exaggeration, then matched his grin. When he drew closer to kiss her, she met him half-way. His hand slid beneath the robe, stroking the skin alongside her breast as their lips met. Nick leaned on his other elbow, his kisses more cautious now and still tentative.

Natalie wanted to push this time, wanted to stir things up a little, but held back. He had to find his own way in this, had to feel comfortable and *safe*, or they might as well end it now . . . which was not at all what she intended. Her fingers reached up to run the line of his neck, exploring the length of his jaw with the barest touch, then drew him to her again as her tongue began to explore his mouth. She moved slowly, softly, carefully.

As did Nick. She felt him cupping her breast in his hand, his fingers cool against the warmth of her skin. He squeezed gently, his thumb flicking along

the nipple and sending shivers through her. Natalie let the sensation wash through her, savored it, and wondered how she'd ever thought they could have felt awkward with one another. It was as if they'd done this a hundred times before, each experience new and yet too perfect to be accidental. *This* was how it should be for them, caring and careful, loving and tentative, moving toward confidence as they responded to one another's touch.

Nick's lips left hers. He nibbled at her ear, buried his face in her hair, leaving a path of soft kisses along her neck. His body pressed along the length of her own and she could feel him even through the terrycloth robe. Her arms went around him, drawing him into a hug, and she thought she might cry, never having had him so close before, never having dared dream that such a thing might be possible.

His hand left her breast as he pulled away from her, breaking their embrace after a moment or two of near stillness between them. She realized then that his eyes were gold and haunted. He dared another kiss, a meeting of lips only, and whispered, "I love you, Nat. And I want you."

She kissed him back, hating to break the spell, the warmth that had settled between them. They couldn't let it get too far out of control. That frightening moment in the shower had taught her that much. Steeling herself, which involved trying to figure out how she could say, 'Gee, guess we'd better chain you down now' without ruining the mood, Natalie took a long breath—

But had no chance to expel it. Nick obviously had other ideas, as he covered her mouth with his own, his kisses still light and careful. She felt his hands tug on the tie of the robe, loosening it, then parting the fabric even as he continued to press his lips against her eyelids and her cheeks. His fingers began to knead the skin of her breasts, stroking lightly, then applying a slight pressure. An occasional finger drifted across either nipple, teasing it.

Moaning low in her throat, Natalie shifted, knocking away more of the terrycloth robe and giving him better access to her skin. His head lifted from hers, moved downward . . . he kissed her breasts, sucking lightly on one nipple and running his tongue across the tip of it, while he pinched the other—not too hard—between his thumb and forefinger. She closed her eyes, feeling adrift in the darkness, centering only on the moment.

A rush of warmth flooded through her, accompanied by a feeling of anticipation and, simultaneously, utter bliss. His fingers were still cool against her skin, as a free hand trailed lightly down her belly, to her pubic hair.

Natalie's eyes shot open in panic, but when Nick raised his head to look at her his eyes were completely blue, with no sign of gold. "For you," he said, raising himself slightly, to kiss her lips again. "I won't be able to hold you or touch you. Let me touch you now . . . ."

Her throat tightened involuntarily and she blinked back the tears that threatened to form. When she'd first considered this adventure, one of the things she'd realized immediately was that she'd lose a good part of what made sex enjoyable for her—behind held and holding. Although she'd be able to hold Nick, to hug him, his arms would be pinioned and he wouldn't be able to return her hug. Getting within reach of his fangs would make kissing after a point entirely out of the question. Sex would be reduced to whatever foreplay he could manage while remaining in control of himself and intercourse with so many restrictions that she was afraid it would seem mechanical and cheap.

She'd doubly enjoyed the contact she'd managed to have with Nick so far, savoring the kisses and caresses because she knew there'd be none later, when she'd need them to soothe her nerves, calm her fears, and allow her to find some pleasure from this escapade as well. Natalie had resigned herself to the fact that it wouldn't end up being all that she could hope for.

Here Nick was, surprise of surprises, offering to make up for the loss on his own initiative. She wouldn't have believed he'd ever have come up with the idea on his own, but he had. Even though half her mind warned her to be cautious and to watch for a repeat of what had nearly happened in the shower, Natalie stretched with abandon as Nick's head lowered again to her breast. Murmuring, "Yes, oh . . . yes . . . ." softly as he continued to suck and nibble at the sensitive skin, alternately nuzzling and biting at her nipples, she arched her back automatically, as if trying to make herself even more accessible to his caresses.

His dedication to the task was phenomenal and she dimly realized that she'd have to give him points for technique. For some reason she'd always been under the impression that Nick understood little, if anything, about women. She'd have to amend that assessment, for there seemed to be a few things at which Nick excelled. Being that most of his mortal lovers during the past eight hundred years had probably never reached this point in a physical relationship, it was some small irritation to consider that she might have Janette to thank for his education in this area. Janette had always struck her as a woman who accepted no less than the best, no matter what the circumstance.

Natalie ran her fingers through Nick's hair and smiled contentedly, luxuriating in both the pleasure instigated by his touch and the feel of him. When the just slightly chilly fingers traced another path down her stomach, pausing in their move to draw light patterns on her skin, she merely sighed. Almost regretfully, she realized that they should have put some CDs on the stereo or something—a consideration for next time.

The idea that she was assuming that there would be a 'next time' broke through the haze of fulfilled desire with which her mind was clouded. But as

quickly as the thought had occurred to her, it was driven clean out of her head by the sudden, electric bolt that raced through her when Nick's wandering fingers found and began to stroke her clitoris. She breathed in—then found she couldn't exhale as wave upon wave of ecstasy oscillated through her, short and sudden bursts of intense joy varied by long and drawn-out plateaus of contentment.

Her fingers clenched in his hair and she realized that she was moaning in complete and utter abandon, letting loose a barrage of sound that both excited and embarrassed her because she couldn't control it. Even more distantly she realized that Nick's head had moved away from her breast, and then his mouth and tongue continued the work of his fingers, toying with and teasing her flesh until she found herself gasping for air. When she felt one of his fingers testing her, then entering her, she lost it completely.

In college, she and a few of her dorm-mates had tired of hearing about the 'mind-shattering orgasms' promised in literally every issue of *Cosmopolitan.* They'd done some field research of their own in this area, in the course of pursuing the male of the species, and had kept accurate and specific data covering everything from food consumed, to film scores, to the location temperature, humidity, and barometric pressure (when available). None of the participants had ever claimed to have managed one of these illusive and often promised events throughout their study, although a couple claimed to have come close.

As her eyes rolled back into her head, Natalie realized that if she hadn't found the real thing, she'd found something so similar that differences in degrees couldn't be considered within the parameters of the definition. Her fingers clenched of their own accord and her elbows seemed to lock. For moment, she was simply unaware of everything, lost in a sea of nothing, where everything was light and bright and beyond comprehension.

At some point, she began to breathe again. She knew she hadn't lost consciousness, but the world seemed a little fuzzy around the edges as she realized that Nick's attentions had returned to her breasts. He kissed her lips and Natalie opened her mouth, not wanting to waste the small amount of passion left unspent. Even though her limbs felt weak and unwieldy, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly, kissing Nick for all she was worth.

Finally, she released him, then fell on her back, utterly and completely exhausted. Nick propped his head on his elbow and lay beside her, the fingers on his right hand tracing patterns on her skin again.

"Well?" he asked, leaning close to kiss and nuzzle her ear.

"Well what?" Natalie stretched out her legs, curling and uncurling her toes, which suddenly felt very tense. "You want a performance evaluation?" She glanced over at him—his eyes were still blue, but tinged with gold. Mentally searching for an adjective, she reached up a hand and ran her knuckles lightly along his cheek. "It was . . . ."

She realized then that her adjectives were gone. "Nice," was the best she could manage.

"Nice?" asked Nick, slightly abashed.

Natalie closed her eyes and thought back. "*Very* nice," she purred, turning on her side to face him. She leaned forward to touch her lips to his lightly. "If I were a general practitioner, I'm prescribe that once a day and twice on Sundays."

"Nat?"

"Hmmn?" Her eyes were mere slits as she kissed him again.

"I think maybe it's time for—" She opened her eyes and saw him turn his hand in the air, indicating the wrist restraints.

Her eyes opened wider as they met his—the sadness was back . . . but he was still more than a little pleased with himself. His eyes were pure gold now, without a speck of blue to be seen. And the pressure of his body against hers told her that he'd been as excited by what he'd done to her as she'd been.

There was something on her fingers—Natalie rubbed her thumb against her forefinger and found strands of blond hair clinging to her nails. She ducked her head guiltily at the discovery and muttered, "Sorry," but he only laughed.

"It didn't hurt," Nick promised, with a grin. "I never even noticed."

"Liar." Still, she raised her hand to his cheek again, wondering if she could feel the fangs beneath the skin with even a gentle touch. "You held control through all that—Nick, that's amazing! Don't think you could—?"

"No," he answered too quickly and too sharply for her liking. Then he took her hand from his face and kissed her fingertips. "I thought of you—only you. I thought of how much I loved you, of how you made me feel. I wanted you to feel that." His smile disappeared and his expression turned deadly serious. "But not this—I don't have that kind of control, Nat."

"Not *yet*," she corrected. Pushing her way up from the bed with a slight groan—yes, those muscles definitely needed regular workouts—she paused and looked down at the robe lying on the bed beneath her. Being naked with Nick was no longer a problem, so she slipped away from the edge of it and pushed it off the bed. Then she looked back at Nick.

He was still lying on the bed, watching her. Only then, seeing him at what should be a state of 'rest,' did she realize what his self-control was costing him. His shoulders practically shook with the effort and one fist was clenched so tightly she could swear that the red dots on his palm were cuts from his

fingernails. She'd thought to ask him if he wanted to go through with this, but knew now that he really had no choice.

And neither did she.

Leaning down to slap his thigh—and a nice thigh it was—she ordered, "Swing around this way."

Nick slid easily on the sheets, once she removed the coverlet (she wondered just how much damage they'd do to his silk sheets, then decided against mentioning it). He sat up, then bent forward as she pulled the leg cuff chains onto the bed. The chains clanked against one another, the sound eerie and disquieting. It made her feel suddenly conscious of her nakedness and she glanced down at the robe on the floor, then decided against it as Nick fastened one of the padded cuffs on his left ankle. It wouldn't be fair, now that she thought about it, if she had a robe to cling to for psychological covering and he was chained naked and defenseless to the bed.

Although the thought did stir some prurient interest, which surprised her somewhat.

Natalie stood back as Nick finished fastening the second cuff to his leg. He shook his foot slightly as if to test it, then gave a grim nod of satisfaction before he laid back down on the black silk sheet. Natalie finally sat down on the bed beside him while he fastened the left cuff on his wrist. His legs had been chained slightly apart, but they'd drawn the chains tight, so that he couldn't move them enough to trap and hold her between them. His arms were held straight out from his body at shoulder level, the wrist chains drawn as tightly as the ankles to prevent movement or leverage, the thought being that if he got even one hand out of the shackle, she'd manage to get far enough away to find some safety before he either regained control, wore himself out . . . or broke free.

When the left cuff was finished, he fell back against the bed almost wearily—his eyes were completely blue without a trace of gold. "I'm going to need your help with the collar—"

Natalie bit her lip, hesitating. They'd hoped he'd be able to secure the collar by himself, both of them trusting his ability to turn and fasten the bolt more tightly than she'd be able to manage with an electric screwdriver. It was the one thing they hadn't tested and absolutely imperative for her safety—the collar would pin Nick's head and chest down, so that he couldn't bite her, even by accident.

Trying to make light of it, she smiled and threaded her fingers through his, before stretching out his right arm to its length and securing the bolt on the cuff. It rattled behind her when Nick tested it and she ignored the sound in favor of concentrating on the clasp at the collar. The bolt slipped into place perfectly. While she was leaning over him, Nick made a sudden move toward her, which set the chains rattling. She froze—

He could raise his head from the bed a mere inch to two inches at best. The rest of his body was firmly and securely pinned in place. It worked.

Natalie was sitting against his ribs. She leaned down and kissed him gently, carefully, whispering, "All right?"

She had a reason to be concerned; there were some men who simply couldn't perform in any position other than the classic missionary position. Sometimes, it was a matter of control. Even if she'd only been joking about performance anxiety earlier, it was a real possibility. Nick was, at the base of everything, a *male* vampire. There were a number of mental games people played with themselves, one of which was their conception of their own sexual prowess. Technique and experience often played a part in confidence, but Nick's movement was so restricted that what he *could* do was limited and she had no idea how much experience he'd had in letting a woman have the dominant role during intercourse.

"Okay," he admitted, after a pause. But there was a twinkle in his eyes as he added, "You know, if you walk out right now, I'll never speak to you again."

"Oh yeah?" Natalie straightened, then reached out a hand to brush back his hair. "And what would you tell the cleaning people when they found you chained up like this?"

"That it's physical therapy."

She chuckled, then leaned down and kissed him again, murmuring, "Damn *right* it is. And don't you forget it."

His lips were slightly cold as she nibbled on them—still safe without his fangs present or any sign of gold in his eyes. She tried to ignore the sudden terror that struck her at the thought that she was in complete and total control of the situation. God, and she'd been worrying about *his* performance anxiety!

And with regard to worrying . . . .

Natalie bent down, whispered, "Be right back," then slipped off the bed and padded across the room to the chair where she'd left her sweats.

"Nat?" asked Nick, managing to contain all but the slightest tremor in his voice, although she heard a chain rattle as he involuntarily shifted and tried to free himself.

"It's okay. Just taking care of something." She searched the pants pockets of the sweats frantically and was on the verge of panic where she found the tiny foil packet hidden in a fold. With a sigh, she walked back to the bed and sat down, holding the packet up so that Nick could see it. "Former Girl Guide," she announced. "I think the motto was 'Be prepared.'"

"If the Girl Guides could see you now . . . ."

She merely smiled and ripped open the packet.

"Um, Nat . . . I told you, I can't *have* children."

Natalie held the little circlet between her thumb and forefinger, discarding the package over her shoulder. "That's not quite true. We know you can't make a female *vampire* pregnant. As far as a mortal woman . . . I think it's pretty safe to assume that any woman who's made it this far with you didn't make it much farther, so we only have hearsay on that score. Besides, you want to be mortal some day, right? When you do, we want you to start out with some good habits in place."

Nick didn't seem at all convinced, but as Natalie turned in place and concentrated on his body from the waist down, she reminded herself that this was for his good, as well as her own. She *did* have a secret, momentary thought about what it would be like to make love to Nick for the first time without a condom between them . . . then decided that she had to teach him *some* form of responsibility. The last thing she wanted was to send out a newly mortal, sexually active former male vampire into the world without an understanding that the life he saved could be his own. Besides, right now the extra lubrication might not be a bad idea, considering.

His erection had softened considerably since their last bout at foreplay . . . for which she blamed the restraints, or at least the way they were forced to employ them. She'd have to give some serious thought to making the restraints more of a turn-on until he gained more control, without addicting Nick to S & M or fetishist tendencies. She moved her hand toward his cock and heard the chain from his collar move—Nick couldn't see what she was doing and that was probably making him more than a little nervous.

Natalie shifted her position, one leg folded beneath her, the other hanging off the bed, so that he would feel that she wasn't trying to block his view—not that he could raise his head enough to see anything. Next time—and she was beginning to expect that there *would* be a next time—she'd have him put on the condom himself, before they got to this point.

Experimentally, Natalie ran her finger lightly along the length of his cock and Nick's entire body shuddered. She placed her fist around the base, careful not to pull out his pubic hair, at least, and moved her hand upward slowly, in a stroking motion. "Do you like that?"

He groaned in response, a low sound coming from deep within his chest. "We'll take that as a yes," she said lightly, then repeated the movement, this time with a bit more speed and pressure. With each stroke, she could feel his penis expanding, becoming more erect. It wasn't long before she felt comfortable enough with the size and fullness of the erection to put on the condom. Placing the small latex circle just to one side of the tip of his penis, she slipped it down with a firm, even pressure.

When she looked up, Nick was staring at the ceiling, his eyes gold. On her hands and knees, she made her way up the bed, then lay against him, partially atop his chest, daring a few last kisses. He'd been holding back since the near-disaster in the shower and now she was suddenly faced with the full force of his passion. He bit and nipped at the edges of her lips and mouth, his tongue exploring hers almost in desperation. She found herself having to come up for air a few times, but quickly plunged back into the fray, kissing and nibbling, exciting herself all over again. But, she decided, it was Nick's turn. What he'd done for her she'd do for him, to the best of her abilities.

She started kissing lightly down his neck, but changed that tactic quickly when every chain on him rattled—she'd forgotten that the major vampiric erogenous zone was something to be avoided under these circumstances. For the moment, Natalie settled for his chest, her fingers tracing the lines of his muscles, caressing as if mapping out the locations of chest hair. She ran her fingers lightly over one of his nipples and when he closed his eyes and groaned again in response, leaned down to taste it. His skin still tasted clean and sweet from the shower, even despite their earlier foreplay. She tweaked one nipple while lightly biting the other, sneaking careful glances at his face to discover his reaction.

His jaw was clenched tightly and his eyes were closed—she wasn't certain, at first, that he was enjoying her attentions. But then she realized that even now he was attempting to stay in control, trying to keep the vampire at bay. Which she didn't entirely mind . . . but a part of her wished that she felt safe enough to tell him to forget it, that the chains would hold and that he should relax and enjoy himself. That wasn't the purpose of this experiment.

Not the *sole* purpose, anyway.

Leaning across him, she hugged him, pressing her body against his, letting her breasts rub against his chest. The result was electric and her nipples hardened at the contact. A wave of desire swept through her at having him so close, at being able to finally love him in this fashion *and* using it to work toward their goal of bringing him back across to mortality. She wanted this to not only be a test of his will, but an affirmation of life.

That's exactly what she found his body to be—an affirmation of life. It seemed odd, after dealing with cadavers day-in and day-out, that she was still fascinated by the body. She pressed close enough to let him feel the heart beating in her chest, then slid down further, to the taut line of his stomach and below that.

His penis was almost completely erect. She pressed her lips lightly to the

tip of the condom, while she reached down between his spread legs and cupped his scrotum. Running her fingernails lightly along the sensitive flesh caused him to gasp aloud . . . which ended in what sounded like a snarl.

The sudden change of tone made her heart skip a beat, but setting her fears aside, Natalie returned to the task at hand. Making a circle with her fingers, she ran her fist up and down his shaft again, careful not to dislodge the condom—having no idea what might set him off, it was better not to take any chances. This time, the snarl didn't scare her as quickly and she grew comfortable with the thought that she'd gotten a better idea of the actual size of him.

Climbing up toward the top of the bed, Natalie swung her leg over Nick's chest, facing him. She moved back slowly and carefully until she felt his penis bump up against her buttocks—something else that made him groan. He was almost panting now, his breathing far quicker and more shallow than she'd ever heard before.

She wasn't certain that she was ready for him. There might be enough natural lubrication left from his earlier attention to her, but she still wasn't sure. She raised herself slightly, then seated herself behind his erection. His eyes were closed, his jaw was clenched, and even his fingers were curled tightly into fists. The muscles in his legs were unnaturally tight, which she found as she ran her hands over them. It didn't matter if she was ready, *he* was ready, and he probably couldn't stand this for much longer.

Kneeling over him, Natalie placed her hand at the base of his shaft and guided the very tip of him inside her. Nick muttered something—she couldn't quite hear, but thought it might be French, before biting down on his lip. She was astonished by the sight of the trickle of blood running down the side of his mouth, then further surprised when his body slammed up into her, burying himself within her in one, sudden motion. She shuddered at the invasion and her leg muscles seemed to melt beneath her, so that she fell heavily down upon him.

His size, thankfully, was not a problem—they fit together beautifully. She held him inside her for an instant, regaining control of her leg muscles and settling her body against his, finding the best way to accommodate him. After that initial push, which had jarred her senses, she found that she was lubricated enough to slide up and down the length of him easily. Hands on his abdomen, she began to ride him, shudders coursing through her body as she moved from holding only the very tip of him inside her, to plunging down the length of him and encasing him again. She kept the pace slow at first, fighting for her own form of concentration as she moved up and down. Before she quite realized what had happened, her body took over control of the pace, slow and then fast, a long, languid thrust followed by several short, sharp ones.

Natalie thought she heard him call her name and more than once, but she couldn't be certain. Her concentration was on the ball of fire growing within her. With each thrust it flared brighter and hotter, scorching her lungs and soul with such delight that she was certain that it couldn't grow any stronger . . . and then it did. She was saying something, screaming something.

Nick's body stilled beneath her and then jerked upward with such fierceness that his thrust carried her with him. His muscles shuddered beneath his skin and she felt his release. That was the one thing she needed to send her over the top, where she drowned in an orgasm that moved through her, centering at their joining and rippling through her body from there. Not just once, but three times she felt that shudder travel through her, dowsing her senses like a candle, leaving her oblivious to anything but the tingling within her. She fell forward onto Nick, her arms wrapping around his chest as she rode out the overpowering sensations with such delight that she thought she might cry from a combination of exhaustion and joy.

The last of their shouts echoed in the room and stillness fell. Natalie lay panting against Nick's chest and she heard his heart beat twice, far faster than should have been the case. She lifted her head, wanting to see his eyes blue, wanting to kiss him and free him so that he could wrap his strong arms around her, taking her into his embrace as securely as she had just taken him.

Nick's eyes were closed, as was his mouth, his fingers still clenched into fists. Natalie propped herself up on his chest and touched a hand to his cheek, smiling. "Nick?"

His eyes, when they shot open, were red . . . even unseeing for an instant. He snarled at her and she stifled a shriek when she found herself faced with fangs. "Let me up," he hissed hoarsely. His head fell back against the pillow, the collar still holding. "Nat—let me up. I can't—I can't!"

For an instant, she didn't know what to do. His panic was real, not feigned—she'd stake her life on it. Which was precisely what she'd be doing if she released him and he attacked her. When he rattled the chains and began to thrash around in a mindless attempt to free himself, she knew she didn't have a choice.

Scrambling to the bottom of the bed, she undid the bolts on the ankle cuffs first. Her fingers were sweaty and the bolts were new and hard to move, but she managed to undo them. Leaning over him, she managed to unfasten the bolt on his right wrist cuff—

Then found herself unceremoniously thrown off the bed and to the floor as he unbolted the left cuff, then the collar around his neck. The whole process

took less than a minute and Natalie barely had a chance to scramble away before Nick moved past her, grabbing his bathrobe around him and becoming a blur.

Sitting there, bare-assed, alone, and cold was about all she could manage for the first few seconds. The afterglow still hadn't left her and she was as stunned by the passion they'd shared as she was to Nick's reaction to the experience. Tears welled in her eyes and she brought her knees up to her body, clutching at her discarded terrycloth bathrobe and draping it over herself for warmth.

Common sense pleaded with, then screamed at her to get her butt out of there, but she wasn't paying much attention to common sense. If fact, if she'd listened to common sense in the first place, she wouldn't be in this mess. But it was too late now for recrimination. She had to find out what had gone wrong, what *she'd* done wrong . . . and how she could set it right again.

Natalie let out a weary groan as she pushed herself up off the floor, then shrugged into the terrycloth bathrobe. For a moment she simply stood there, getting her bearings and letting her muscles remember what gravity was for. She'd certainly gotten a workout; she made a mental note to remember this feeling the next time she was tempted to join a gym that she'd never have any time to go to—this was a lot more satisfying and cheaper in some ways.

But *only* in some ways. Leaving the bedroom, she wandered out to the railing and looked down over the first floor, wondering where Nick might have gone and if she dared to face him, considering the state in which she'd last seen him.

The first thing she spotted was an empty green bottle discarded on the floor by the refrigerator. She could see his back; Nick was sitting with one arm on the table, his head resting on it, and a half-filled bottle of cow's blood just within reach of the other hand. Natalie walked slowly down the staircase, waiting for some sign of life, some movement or acknowledgment of her presence . . . but there was nothing.

Fear flitted through her before she quashed it and set her resolve—she was responsible for this. And if Nick had completely lost control, she would have been dead already. She drew close to him, ruffling his still damp hair lightly. "Nick?"

He moved his head a little, but didn't answer her. Swallowing, she stepped closer, her right hand still resting in his hair, not certain at all about what to do or what to say, other than, "I'm sorry. I should never have—"

Nick lifted his head then and turned in the chair to look at her. His eyes were blue, not gold, and there were bids of red flaking from the corners, as if he'd shed a few tears. He took her right hand and pressed her knuckles to his lips, kissing them fervently. "No—don't be. You've got nothing to be sorry about. It's my fault. I couldn't control it. It was too strong, I couldn't get a handle on it. And then, the chains . . . ."

A sudden cold spot appeared in the pit of her stomach as he looked away, the odd break in his voice making her afraid. "Nick, what *about* the chains?"

His eyes were distant, focused elsewhere—she realized that that he was caught up in his memories. "It was while I was on Crusade—afterward, really, on my way home. I was captured and held for ransom. I spent almost a year of my life in chains."

"You've never mentioned it—"

"I'd forgotten about it." He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose with the tips of his fingers. "Until the end—it all came back to me. I—Nat, I panicked. You shouldn't have released me. God knows what I could have done to you . . . ."

A year. Of his life. In chains.

What had she done? Natalie took a deep breath, remembering her warning to him earlier, that they'd face things in this that they'd never really thought about. This however, was completely unexpected. She gently pulled her hand from his and leaned close to him, circling his neck with her arms and hugging him tightly, as if she could protect him from the memories. "I'm sorry. I never thought . . . I didn't know."

"How could you?" He freed himself from her grasp and took her hands in his, looking up at her intently. "Like I said, I'd forgotten all about it. That's what triggered the panic, I think. And . . . I needed the blood. I *needed* it."

She licked her lips lightly as she stared at him, wondering how he could be so understanding, so *calm* about it. "It's my fault—I should have addressed the blood issue earlier. My God, what am I saying? I should never have gotten you into this at all—"

Natalie started to pull away from him, but he held her hands tightly in his own, refusing to release her. "Come here," he said softly, drawing her into his lap.

She resisted for a moment, but gathered her robe together and sat down on him, resting her head on his shoulder. Nick's hand moved to cradle her head, his fingers tangling in and toying with her hair. He leaned his lips toward hers, hesitating before kissing her, searching out her eyes as if in permission.

Natalie closed her eyes as his lips touched hers, then opened her mouth slightly. He began tentatively, carefully and all the tension within her dissolved at the feeling of safety and warmth that flooded through her, cradled in his

arms and, for an instant, the center of his universe. *This* was what she'd been denied when he'd run from the room, this emotional maintenance.

Her head rested against his shoulder and she sighed. "I needed that."

"I thought you might." He planted a kiss on her forehead and gazed down at her fondly. "Well . . . what's the verdict? How'd we do?"

"The chains held, so I got that bit right, at least, although if I'd known—"

"Not *that*," scolded Nick lightly, He nodded toward the upper floor, adding, "the *other*."

"Oh. *That.*" Natalie shifted, adjusting her position in his lap. Even through his bathrobe and her terrycloth robe, she was very aware of his continuing interest in her. "I expect to be sore for a day or two—"

Nick's eyes clouded and he touched her face gently with the back of his hand. "If I hurt you—"

"*Hurt* me?" Her eyes widened and she smiled. "No, I'm about as 'unhurt' as I could be. Just not used to that much exercise, I guess. A long soak in a hot tub should take care of it." She touched the tip of his nose with her finger when she saw the sudden relief in his eyes. "You . . . surprised me. In a good way," she amended quickly, when his eyes threatened to cloud over again. "I didn't expect you to be so strong. And I can't believe you were able to keep the vampire in check for so long."

"I think—" He hesitated, looking away for a moment, then back to her. "I think I know a little bit more about my limits. What's safe . . . and what's not."

"Ummmm." Lowering her head to rest against his neck, Natalie sighed. "I just wish you'd been able to enjoy it more."

He placed his fingers beneath her chin, so that she'd move enough to meet his eyes. "And you think I *didn't*?" he asked, incredulous.

There was joy, utter delight in his expression . . . and Natalie finally began to realize exactly how much their encounter had meant to him. She'd hoped to heal some part of him that was broken and wounded and, at that instant, she realized that she might just have succeeded on that score. "Well," she said slowly, pretending thoughtfulness, "I do remember you yelling something in—I guess it was French."

"I wasn't the only one screaming—"

"*Not* screaming," she denied, somewhat abashed.

"*Screaming*," he repeated, eyes sparkling. "I don't seem to remember anything coherent—I was sort of busy at the time—but I'm *very* glad that I don't have any neighbors to speak of."

"We'll see who screams next time," she teased.

The words slipped out before she realized what she was saying. Nick's smile faded, his expression becoming very serious as he lifted her hand to his lips. "Next time?"

Very deliberately, he began sucking on her knuckles. It sent shivers through her, but she tried to appear collected and unaffected. "I mean, if there *is* a next time. That is, if you want—"

"I want *you*" he whispered, dropping her hand in favor of her lips, as he cradled her in his arms and kissed her gently. "I want you, whenever and wherever you're willing to have me."

"Within reason," she amended, as they parted.

"To hell with reason—" His comment was a growl and he leaned into the kiss, passionate and forceful. It all but sucked the air out of her lungs and when they finally parted, she was gasping . . . but more than ready to go back for round two.

Until she saw that his eyes were gold. Natalie raised a finger to his lips and said shakily, "That's enough for now. You've been a busy boy. And I, for one, have a very mortal constitution."

He lowered his gaze and closed his eyes—when he looked back at her, his eyes had returned to their normal color and the momentary defeat in his gaze was replaced by hope. "When?" he asked eagerly.

Natalie thought quickly, making a mental match of what she knew of their schedules. "Next Tuesday?"

"Too far away. Tomorrow."

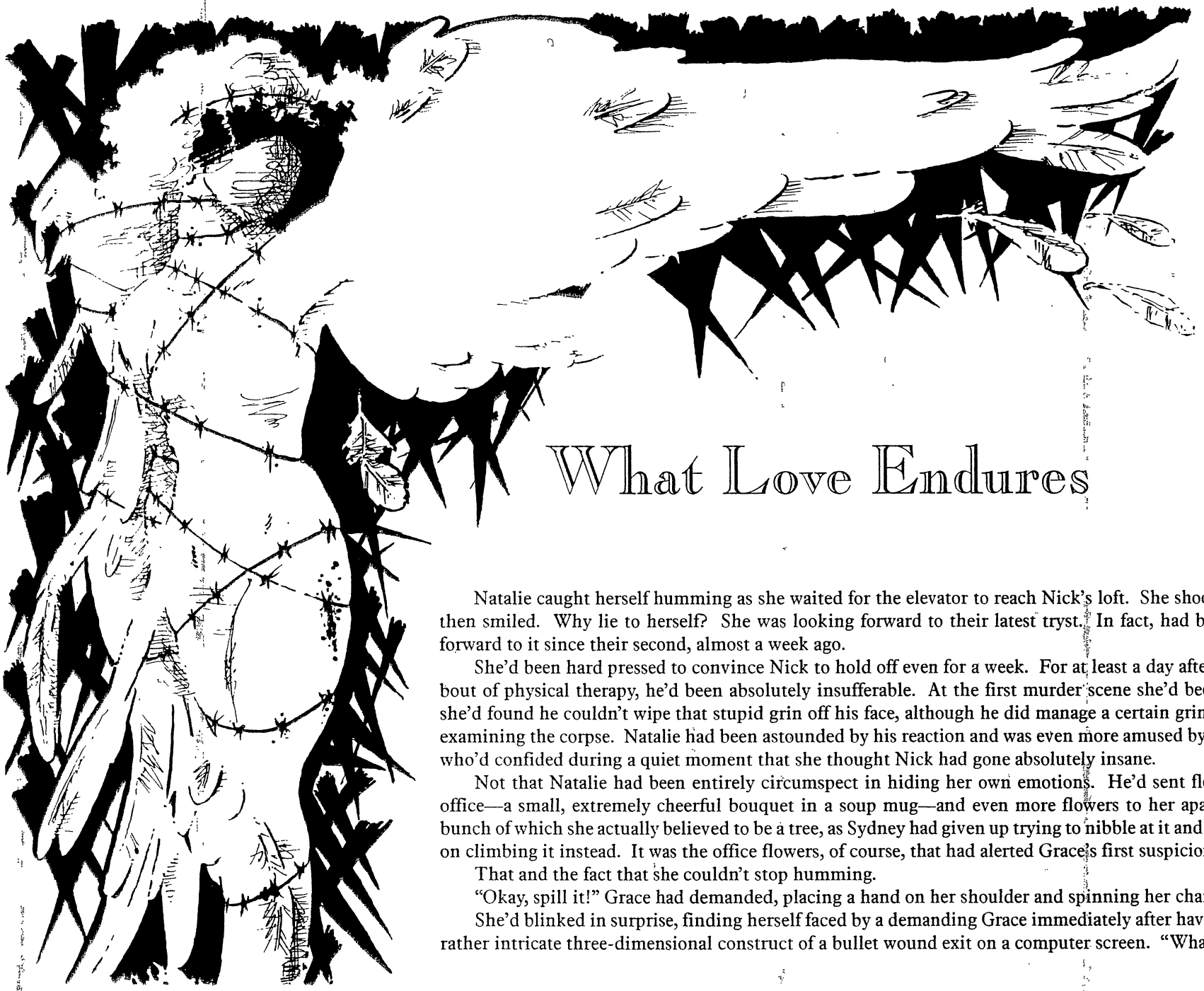
"*Not* tomorrow. We've both got work and I'm on the afternoon shift. And I'm *not* meeting you here for your dinner break," she added, cutting off his reply before it could form. Taking his hands in her own, she wrapped her fingers tightly around his. "Nick, we've got to take this slowly. We have to be careful; we both know that. I want to work with you on this, set up parameters, set up goals for control . . . and—" she finally looked up, meeting his eyes, "I want it to *mean* something. I want this to be special."

"You're right." He smiled and squeezed her hand. "It's just that—it's so impossible. We've found a way. I *can* love you, Nat. I *do* love you."

He was too happy, but she wasn't about to spoil it for him. Right off the top of her head she could name two dozen reasons why this would be a bad thing, and the first six all began with 'LaCroix.' But to stomp on his joy now would be like stealing a toy from a child at Christmas.

She forced a smile, echoing his sentiment and, as they kissed again, she decided not to burden him with the downside. For the moment, she could share his joy and pretend that all the barriers had fallen, that they *could* love one another, that it wasn't a dream.

And she wouldn't have to pretend that hard, because she had the bruises to prove it.



What Love Endures

Natalie caught herself humming as she waited for the elevator to reach Nick's loft. She shook her head, then smiled. Why lie to herself? She was looking forward to their latest tryst. In fact, had been looking forward to it since their second, almost a week ago.

She'd been hard pressed to convince Nick to hold off even for a week. For at least a day after their little bout of physical therapy, he'd been absolutely insufferable. At the first murder scene she'd been called to, she'd found he couldn't wipe that stupid grin off his face, although he did manage a certain grim look when examining the corpse. Natalie had been astounded by his reaction and was even more amused by his partner, who'd confided during a quiet moment that she thought Nick had gone absolutely insane.

Not that Natalie had been entirely circumspect in hiding her own emotions. He'd sent flowers to the office—a small, extremely cheerful bouquet in a soup mug—and even more flowers to her apartment, one bunch of which she actually believed to be a tree, as Sydney had given up trying to nibble at it and had decided on climbing it instead. It was the office flowers, of course, that had alerted Grace's first suspicions.

That and the fact that she couldn't stop humming.

"Okay, spill it!" Grace had demanded, placing a hand on her shoulder and spinning her chair around.

She'd blinked in surprise, finding herself faced by a demanding Grace immediately after having viewed a rather intricate three-dimensional construct of a bullet wound exit on a computer screen. "What?"

"Spill it," Grace had demanded again. Then she'd smiled, ever so softly. "Why, Natalie Lambert, I do believe you've finally nailed our fair-haired detective."

Natalie was pretty certain she'd blushed from her roots straight down to her toes. But she'd tried to bluff it out and had turned around again, saying, "I have no idea what—"

"Don't give me that," cautioned Grace, standing at her shoulder. "You're humming. You've *been* humming for two days. And Detective Nick 'can't stop smiling at the world' Knight has been walking around like a cat with cream on its whiskers."

That image had stopped her cold and she'd glanced over her shoulder at Grace with some small sense of satisfaction. "He *has*, hasn't he?"

"Aha!" Grace folded her arms triumphantly. "Don't know why I haven't put in for a detective's shield myself."

"Neither do I," she'd agreed. Then she'd given Grace a steady stare. "But nobody knows, right? This doesn't go anywhere. It's between Nick and I."

Grace simply gave her a supportive smile and leaned forward to tap her on the shoulder. "You just go on believing that, honey."

She'd swallowed in embarrassment. "It's . . . that obvious, is it?"

"From you? No. Not unless someone knew you real well. The humming—that kind of gave it away for me. But Nick . . . well, he's been wandering around the past few months like he's ready to chew paint off the walls. I don't want to tell you how many times somebody—no names, please—or another has made a point of saying that boy needs to get laid." Grace had shaken her head, as if in wonder that Nick, of all people, would have that particular problem. "But for the past two days he's been, well, kinda calm. Relaxed. Almost too relaxed." She'd squeezed Natalie's shoulder. "Whatever you're doing, you keep it up. You're good for each other."

Of course, bringing the whole subject up with Nick had proven to have difficulties of its own. They were okay at crime scenes, but if they had a moment together alone in a corridor or a lab . . . . There was one point when he'd maneuvered her into a secluded corner of the police station and before she could get any further than his name, had taken the opportunity to kiss her so thoroughly and completely that the files she'd been holding had slipped from her hands and she swore she'd popped the strap on her shoe.

"When?" Nick had asked softly, when he'd allowed her to come up for breath.

She'd been oxygen deprived . . . that was her excuse. Somehow, she'd managed not to give in to instinct—which would have meant grabbing his arm and dragging him back to the Caddie and his place—but had muttered, "Friday night."

"Friday, then," he'd answered. Then he'd planted a quick kiss on her lips and wandered off, leaving her to track down the various pieces of paper that had fallen from the file, one of which had led her face to shoe with Captain Reese. He'd merely smiled and walked away as if one of his police detectives hadn't kissed a coroner senseless in a secluded corner of the police station.

Friday had arrived—she was on an early morning shift and so had the afternoon and evening off . . . just as she knew that Friday was Nick's night off. At some point she'd have to investigate the effect his body clock might have on certain biological functions, but had decided to test that particular line of inquiry when they were more at ease and less caught up in the novelty of the thing.

It *was* a novelty. It hadn't taken much for Natalie to admit to herself that she hadn't had an on-going sexual relationship for some time. However schoolgirlish and ridiculous it might seem, she found herself as eager as Nick to see if their first attempt at togetherness past a kiss was a fluke or if they really had something there. She'd been more than a little nervous leaving work and heading straight for Nick's place that Friday night, without so much as a shower or lingerie more exotic than matching satin panties and a bra.

He'd met her at the elevator door with flowers and wearing a nice jacket and tie—*very* formal. There'd been an awkward moment at first—she wouldn't look at him, he wouldn't look at her . . . then she'd smacked him with the flowers and everything was fine.

Until she'd seen dinner—because his kitchen table was covered with a tablecloth and an intimate candlelit dinner for two.

She'd almost cried. But then her stomach had rumbled and she'd laughed instead. Nick had taken her elbow and escorted her to the table like a proper lady, pushing in her chair for her, then seated himself to her left. The steak was rare, the wine something she was certain she'd never been able to afford on her own salary, and the company was incomparable.

They'd chatted like friends, over work and other things. Although she found herself stealing glances at his eyes—how blue they were!—and allowing herself to be infinitely charmed by his smile, or the way he occasionally caught her hand and held it, or squeezed it . . . then just as quickly released her as if he'd been burned or had done something not quite allowable under the circumstance. He'd even taken a bite or two of steak during dinner—although he wasn't quite quick enough to hide the fact that he'd spit the meat into his napkin. And the wine he was drinking was thicker and far less translucent than her own.

It was long after she'd finished her meal—which she'd proclaimed excellent much to his satisfaction—and a lull in conversation that he held her fingers between his own, lightly stroking them with his thumb. Natalie had looked up, eyes meeting his. There was no hesitation as she leaned forward just as he did, their lips meeting—touching lightly, again, then parting for a more serious exploration.

He'd had blood-breath.

She'd made some strangled sound as she'd pulled away, because Nick had simply sat there with an incredibly hurt look on his face. "What?"

Natalie tried to fight back her revulsion and managed to catch most of it, but she couldn't quite wipe the expression off her face. "The—uh—blood—?"

Nick had laughed. "Oh, yeah. Cow blood." He'd picked up his glass and held it to the light, then taken another swallow. "You know," he'd explained, after a few more sips, "Janette used to make the same face. She didn't like 'cow.'"

"I'll agree with her on that." When Nick leaned in for another kiss, Natalie rose from her seat and pointed upstairs. "Sorry, buddy, but lips that have touched cow are *not* touching mine. *First* you gargle. Then . . . we'll see."

"You don't hear me complaining about the steak. Or the coffee. Do you *know* what coffee tastes like—?"

"March!" she'd commanded, still pointing to the second story. "Or no dessert."

"Yes, ma'am." Still, he'd smiled as he'd risen from his place, but snuck a quick kiss to her forehead before she could protest.

Natalie had taken the few minutes of privacy to settle some of the butterflies in her stomach—which the wine had done a bit to ease, thank heavens. She'd risen from her chair, after exiling Nick to a quick gargle, and had walked over to her couch and her purse. She'd brought a few condoms with her, just in case he hadn't gotten the drill down yet. Not to mention the fact that immediately after their first encounter she'd taken her own precautions and started using the pill again, after a long absence.

Standing there, her purse open, she thought about how odd it all seemed, how awkward . . . and her courage almost left her. She'd felt foolish and silly again. The butterflies had looped and swirled in her stomach to the point where she'd almost regretted having eaten.

There were things they had to discuss about what had happened the last time, both from a standpoint of safety and gathering data. This was, after all, an experiment to find out a little bit more about what made the vampire tick . . . although she'd also stumbled into a few things that seemed to make Nick tick, too. She'd thought of things to begin the conversation, then discarded them just as quickly. There was nothing more 'un' romantic than having a very frank and clinical discussion about sex—and from the moment she'd walked into the room, Nick had sent every signal known to man, and a few more perhaps, that he wanted to make love to her in the worst way.

She'd heard him on the stairs but didn't turn, trying to come up with something to say that wouldn't make her sound like an adolescent or a research scientist. His aftershave reached her first, and then he stood behind her and placed his arms around her, drawing her close in an embrace of silk.

He was wearing his bathrobe. From that hug, it appeared that he was wearing nothing *but* his bathrobe.

She'd turned in his arms as he'd loosened his embrace and accused, "You've started without me."

"You'll have to catch up, then. Won't you?" he'd asked, then leaned forward to nibble at her ears, tracing the line of her jaw with kisses and ending at her lips.

She'd known then that any data gathering from that point on would involve observation and practice. Nick wasn't in the mood for talking. Not that she really minded . . . .

Natalie slipped off her shoes, then placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back slightly. Still cautious, Nick stopped his exploration of her mouth immediately and met her eyes in concern.

"I just got off work," she'd complained. "I must smell like formaldehyde."

"But I *like* the way you smell."

His protest had been so soft and charming and his gaze was so intense that something inside her had melted right on the spot. But Natalie had cleared her throat and moved past him, heading for the stairs. "I need a shower."

He hadn't moved—stood right where she'd left him—and asked, "Would you mind if I joined you?"

Her hand had frozen on the banister, one foot on the first step. A brief chill passed through her when she'd recalled the near disaster of their first shower together, how for that one instant Nick had lost control and she had been too wrapped up in the sensations of the moment to notice or even care. He'd regained his self-possession quickly enough and fled from her, falling immediately into a pit of self-loathing so deep that she'd had to make a hell of an effort to lift his spirits again. But it had been close. So very close . . . .

He'd phrased it carefully, allowing her to make the decision. Natalie had known almost immediately that she had to prove to him that she trusted him—and she did, as far as that went. If they were careful, if they concentrated on flesh being flesh, if they let the water run a little colder—

"Do you think that's wise?" she'd asked, after a pause that had seemed like an eternity to her.

She'd heard his footsteps behind her, bare feet on the carpeting, then the floor. He'd stood close, but not touching. "If you want to know if I can handle it — yes. There was so much involved last time . . . it was all too fast. But I know what to do now."

There'd been such certitude in his voice that she'd glanced over her shoulder, curiosity getting the better of her. "And that would be—?"

"To concentrate completely on you, on making you happy."

That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. He'd planted a kiss just behind her ear, maneuvered himself so that he stood on the step above her, and held out his hand.

There'd been no hesitation when she'd placed her hand in his. He'd gathered her into his arms, then led her up the stairs with his arm still around her, as if shielding her, protecting her from all harm. He'd been solicitude itself when he held the bathroom door for her and then reached into the stall to start the shower. Natalie had started to unbutton her blouse, but his hands brushed away her own. She'd looked up in trepidation and had seen only a warm smile.

She'd always thought of his fingers as large, but he managed the buttons carefully, never pulling so much as a stitch from the holes in unfastening them and removing every button straight down to the bottom of the blouse, when she'd have been more than ready to pull the thing up over her head after the first two buttons had been unfastened. He'd carefully pulled her arms from the sleeves, then placed the blouse on the doorknob. Her skirt had been next—he'd undone the belt blindly, looking into her eyes all the while, but without any fumbling or misstep. When the fastening had been opened at the back, he didn't release it, but slid it down the length of her legs, then gave her his hand as she stepped out of it. It, too, had been positioned over the doorknob.

Her hose had quickly followed her skirt to the floor, but by this point Natalie had found that her legs weren't quite supporting her anymore—she'd also offered up a thankful prayer to whomever watched over wandering coroners that she'd remembered to shave them, especially with Nick's hands sliding sensuously along their length, just the briefest caress. She'd bitten her lip and leaned a little heavily on his shoulder.

Her hand had slid on the silk, her fingers clutched it desperately . . . and then balance was no longer an issue as he'd risen to his feet, his arm around her waist. Her grasp had opened his robe, but she refrained from peeking. Once he'd established that she was stable again, he'd walked behind her and slipped the bra straps down her shoulders, then unfastened the hooks at the back with a single pull—which made her wonder how long ago he'd learned *that* particular maneuver and when he'd gotten so good at it.

But she'd refrained from commenting, distracted by the cool air on her skin—it had still been quite chilly despite the steam from the shower (she'd *assumed* it was from the shower.). Her nipples were standing straight at attention and she'd felt a blush coming on, some aspect of modesty making her raise her arms to shield her sudden nudity.

Nick's hands had fallen to her shoulders. He'd gently entwined his fingers with her own, pulling her arms from her body and stepping back. His gaze had been nothing but admiring as he'd told her, "Never hide from me. I want to see everything. You're *so* beautiful . . . ."

She'd moved forward, slipping her arms around his neck and drawing him close. His lips touched hers and she'd barely noticed that his hands had slipped the waistband of her panties down around her hips. They'd slid to the floor and she'd kicked them away as an afterthought, still more than a little entranced by the kiss.

There'd been nothing wild or passionate about it—it had been a gentle kiss, a quiet exploration of one another. When they'd parted, she'd felt less breathless than satisfied, like her spirit had been caressed by warmth.

She'd wanted to cry again. And even more an instant later, as Nick took her hand and led her to the shower with such regal formality that she felt like royalty. She'd stepped inside and he'd followed, after shedding the silk dressing gown—although the exact terminology regarding that particular piece of clothing was still a matter of some contention between them. Natalie had even considered bringing up the subject, but it had seemed too coarse and tawdry. She didn't want to break the spell that had fallen over her.

She'd let herself be guided by him, turned to face the back of the shower, then leaning her head back beneath the spray of water as his hands moved through the tangle of her hair. Her body had been slightly off balance, but she'd trusted that strong hand beneath her shoulders not to let her fall and closed her eyes, enjoying the scent of the shampoo, the slight pressure of his fingertips as he kneaded her scalp, then rinsed the water through again to banish the last of the suds.

With a sense of regret, she'd finally straightened, flung her drenched hair back and out of the way, and smiled at him. "Your turn."

"No." Nick had picked up the soap and begun rubbing it between his palms. "I told you, this is for you. Trust me."

"I *do* trust you," she'd protested, however cheated she'd felt at not being able to wash his hair, which fascinated her. But her protests didn't seem to

lead to any capitulation on his part—Nick simply turned her around, facing the showerhead, and then positioned himself behind her.

She'd thought at first that he meant to soap down her back as he'd done the time before, but he moved closer to her, until her back was flat against his chest and she felt the beginning of his erection against her buttock. Natalie had turned her head to warn him, to remind him that too close contact had nearly led to disaster—

And found her latest protest suffocated in a slow and careful kiss. His hands had moved around her front, leaning her back against him, inviting her to let her weight rest upon him. They'd cupped her breasts, smoothing the soap over and around her flesh, the fingers catching her nipples, teasing them, and sliding off again.

Within the kiss she'd moaned in delight and closed her eyes, reveling in the sensation of his hands on her, soaping her skin with slow and insistent circles, wandering over her ribs and upper thighs, then returning to her breasts to tease, again and again. No matter how often the shower spray washed the soap from her, his hands returned to spread yet another soft film, caressing and soothing her, lulling her into a sense of bliss that she found almost hypnotic, until she simply rested her head on his shoulder in utter and absolute contentment.

His right hand had remained on her breast, stroking lightly, when she'd realized that his left hand had wandered just a bit further than before. A sudden surge of electricity had jolted through her and she'd shivered as fingers slid across her clitoris, then shivered again as those same fingers moved even lower. First one had entered her, then two together—it had been no invasion, but a slow stroking that had seemed natural, even expected, the soap providing more than enough lubrication. Her breath had caught at that moment, then she'd pressed back against him as his thumb settled in the valley just above her opening and began to stroke her gently.

Natalie had arched her back, pressing against him, her head shifting—too late had she realized that she was baring her neck to him, as if inviting him to sink his teeth into her. But a glance at Nick's eyes had confirmed his earlier statement—they were intent, but blue, with not a trace of gold. He'd smiled at her, kissed her temple and whispered, "Relax," into her ear with such absolute conviction that she'd felt more than a little guilty at enjoying his single-minded devotion. Despite the danger, Natalie reached her hand behind her to find him, but his hand left her breast to firmly dissuade her.

"Relax," Nick had said again, and she'd raised her arms over her head, bending them back around his neck behind her and linked her fingers. The movement was uncalculated on her part—she'd done it mainly to keep her hands from wandering all over him—but she'd soon realized that she'd also taken some of the pressure of her weight off him and raised herself slightly on tiptoes.

Oddly enough, it had seemed to be just the position Nick had been looking for. His right arm was held across her, his hand upon her left breast, fingers splayed and alternately caressing and pinching lightly, while the fingers of his left slipped out of her and entered again, keeping careful time with the motion of his thumb.

Her breath had grown more ragged as the seconds passed, Nick knowing enough to vary the rhythm—fast, then slow, then fast again. It had been maddening, frustrating, and indulgent to the point of sin, but she hadn't much cared. The sensations had spiderwebbed through her body slowly, insidiously, so that she couldn't quite tell when her fingertips had grown numb or her toes had begun to tingle. Each thrust, each stroke, had sent reverberations through her, wave after wave of warmth, until there was no conscious thought left to her. When Nick's lips sought her own, she'd nibbled them hungrily, greedily, needing to find some way to expend the tension that was driving her so slowly and deliciously into insanity.

They'd been locked in a kiss when the crest of the wave hit her. For an instant, there was no air or sound—even the steady hiss of water from the showerhead seemed to disappear. Everything was white and brilliant, then the shudder had started at the center of her being—which, oddly enough, seemed to be about the location of Nick's left hand—passing through every nerve and muscle and fiber to which it could travel. There'd been sound again because she'd made it—a long, low, drawn-out cry of ecstasy that was absorbed by Nick's mouth upon her own.

Her legs had given way, her arms had slipped from his neck, but he held her tightly, his fingers leaving their careful ministrations and settling again on her breast, while the other hand had slid down to the flat of her stomach as she rode out the tide of sensation. Even before it was quite done, Nick had lifted her into his arms and carried her from the shower. She'd dimly realized that he'd wrapped her in an oversized towel, all but cocooning her in dry warmth. He'd slipped into the terri-cloth bathrobe that she'd convinced him to purchase, sat down on the lid of the commode, and held her in his arms.

Natalie had long ago determined that she was not the kind of woman who drifted easily into the darkness of slumber after any type of sexual act, but this one time the temptation was so strong as to be almost overpowering. She had been absolutely and completely drained. And yet she felt utterly safe in his arms, his cheek resting against her own.

She'd found however—when her eyes had focused enough to actually

comprehend what she was seeing—that his gaze was distant. Nick's expression was almost wistful, not quite sad, but the edges of his smile seemed to indicate a bitterness that made her want to free herself, fold her arms around him, and promise him that she'd never let the world or anything hurt him again.

Instead, she'd simply snuggled closer against him and, having gained his attention, managed a very faint and slightly breathless, "Thank you."

The distance in his eyes had disappeared then and his smile had seemed more content, although there was still a shadow, a trace of sadness that she hadn't been able to identify . . . and wondered, really, if she ever would. He'd leaned his forehead against hers in silent communion and she'd listened to the sounds of her own breathing begin to relax and ease into a normal rhythm. She could very easily have fallen asleep, feeling sheltered and secure and loved.

Instead, she'd freed her hand from confinement and ran her fingers through his hair, stroking and massaging just behind his ear. Her lips had met his in soft, short kisses, tender and fleeting, each lingering a little longer than the last. Fingers splayed, she'd reached beneath the bathrobe he was wearing and drew her hands down his still-damp chest, then followed with her mouth, licking the droplets of water from the skin of his throat, the hollow of his neck . . . .

A sound had escaped Nick's lips, something between a sigh and a moan, and then his hand had moved to the side of her throat. Natalie had looked up and seen that his eyes had drifted to gold—those same eyes still stared at her with such unbearable sadness. He'd moved to lift her in his arms again, but she'd scrambled out of his lap, then held out her hand to him. There'd been something in his gaze that had settled a weight over her own heart and she was beginning to understand—what they'd managed was only a semblance of what they might have with one another had he not been a vampire.

Nick had taken her hand and it became a struggle between them as to who would pull whom—but finally he acquiesced and stumbled to his feet, his momentum causing him to push her backwards slightly. Her heart had beaten in double-time as she'd found her back to the wall and Nick pressed up against her. He'd stared down into her eyes, raised a hand to brush back the hair from the side of her face, then kissed her again.

Her breath had caught in her throat when she realized that she was trapped . . . and knew, too, that his eyes were gold. But the kiss had been quick, pro-forma and without any real feeling. Nick had rested his forehead on her shoulder, his eyes and face hidden in her warm flesh and framed by the edges of the towel. "I'm sorry," he'd whispered. "It's wrong. It's not real." He'd raised his head and his eyes were blue again, but there were small droplets of red at the corner—blood tears. "You deserve more than this."

"More?" she'd echoed, trying to keep her voice from shaking at the sight of his despair. "More than what? Than you? Nick, all I want is you—"

"And you can have me—in chains. In there—" He'd inclined his head toward the bedroom almost as an afterthought. "But not here. Not downstairs. Not at your place. Not in the grass or by the lake. It's not real."

Natalie had been surprised, then realized that she shouldn't have been—Nick had always been a little more than borderline when it came to being manic-depressive. "None of that matters," she'd said firmly. Cupping his face in her hands, she'd lifted his head so that his eyes met her own. "We have to start somewhere. I'm happy to start here—or in there." She'd smiled as she'd mimicked his earlier nod. "This isn't the end of it—it's only the beginning. We can build from here. And it's real, Nick. It's all real. This is real—" she'd touched her lips lightly to his forehead, "—and this is real—" she'd pressed her body closer to his own, letting the towel slip slightly so that her skin pressed against his, through the parting of his robe, "and *this*—" she reached down and ran her fingers lightly along the length of his semi-erect shaft, "is real."

His eyes had widened slightly when she'd touched him, then he'd taken her hands in his own and pressed then to his lips. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I have no idea. But if you keep doing what you did in the shower, you'll have a hell of a time getting rid of me." She'd let her arms slip down to his waist and settle around him loosely. "I'm going to be honest . . . I don't think I can top that."

He'd brightened at the praise. Touching her nose lightly with his finger, he'd answered, "It was my pleasure." His arm had settled down upon her waist and he'd opened the bathroom door. "Gives us something to shoot for, though."

There'd been something of their old friendship in the easy camaraderie they'd shared, walking from the bathroom to the bedroom. She'd been concerned even before they'd emnarked on this adventure that the special friendship they'd shared would be sacrificed to this new level of their relationship. But it was still there, made a little more close and special, as evidenced by Nick's having lost a lot of the reluctance he'd had about touching her. His touch—whether a simple caress of her cheek, the weight of his hand on her shoulder or the presence of his arm encircling her waist . . . not entirely excluding what those very talented fingers could do to certain portions of her anatomy—was becoming almost as important to her as his smile, or his kiss, or that light she'd see in his eyes whenever she was near.

She'd stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and turned toward him.

"What we're shooting for," she'd said softly, "is your return to mortality. This is only one step. We're going to have to work on your control until we can get rid of those restraints entirely."

He'd gazed down at her, his expression serious, his hand lifting to stroke the line of her cheek. "It's going to take a while."

"It's going to take *practice*," she'd corrected, allowing herself the indulgence of a smile at just what that statement entailed. "My worry is that you'll get bored and wander off."

His arm had tightened its grip around her, drawing her closer. "Believe me," he'd whispered, touching his lips to hers, "I have no intention of 'wandering off' now or anytime in the future. And as for being bored—"

She'd begun to distinguish a pattern in his kisses—a careful undertone that meant he was worried about his control and afraid of hurting her, a gentle and tender quality when he'd been touched by something she'd done or said or when he'd concentrated on her pleasure alone, and then there were the times when passion seemed to overcome him. It might have been the vampire or the desperation of a very lonely and loving man too long denied simple, human intercourse, but there was an edge to those kisses, a ferocious hunger that wouldn't be denied or held at bay for any length of time or under any circumstance.

His lips had met hers in a kiss that was anything but gentle. Nick's hands had cupped her face as he'd devoured her mouth, nibbling here and there, taking control of her so completely that she was certain she'd never breathe again. Her hands had slipped beneath his robe, tracing the lines of his chest, running the length of his ribcage lightly, then more insistantly, until she'd reached his hips. She rather liked his thighs, the way the skin molded tightly over the vastus externus. The flesh there was firm and taut and she'd felt the pressure of it against her as he'd slipped his right leg between her own.

Her brain had known enough to take note of certain things, even as she'd lost herself in responding to his kiss and proximity. Nick's body had begun to respond as well and another pressure of flesh between them had told her that he was on his way to recovering his previous near-erection. She'd brushed her hand along the flat of his stomach, then let it range lower, finding him and making a light fist around his shaft.

Nick's hands had dropped from her face and he'd leaned forward with a low groan, his forehead touching hers. He'd caught her hands in his own as she'd released him. There had been color in his cheeks and his nostrils were flared—his breathing was ragged and he'd shaken his head as if to clear it, eyes closed tightly. "Too fast," he'd muttered. "Too fast—"

She'd known what he was hiding from her—the gold of his eyes. Deciding not to even think about the fact that he might have been pushed far enough beyond his limits to be seeing the world through an awful, uncontrollable red haze, Natalie had placed her hand between his shoulder blades and had all but pushed him into the bedroom. Once he'd turned away from her, Nick had headed directly for the table beside the bed . . . and the bottle of blood he'd no doubt placed there earlier.

The cork had fallen to the floor with the barest flick of his thumb. He'd raised the bottle to his lips—then stopped, turning to look at her.

There had been no shame between them, except for this . . . his need for blood. She'd walked over to him, her robe swinging open, as unfastened as his own. Nodding, she placed a hand on his arm when she saw the grim look on his lips—something between humiliation and self-disgust. "Go ahead," she'd told him, forcing a wan smile . . . and dreading the taste of blood on his lips and the smell on his breath. "If it helps now, it's something I can live with. It's going to take time. We both know that."

He'd turned away again as he'd shaken off her grip and lifted the bottle to his mouth. Tilting his head backward, Nick had taken one long swallow, then another, not bothering to breathe between the two. For a moment, she'd thought his intent was to simply chug the entire bottle.

But he'd stopped at the halfway mark and smashed it down on the bedside table with such force, she'd been astonished that it hadn't shattered. Still refusing to look at her, he'd wiped his mouth roughly with his sleeve.

She'd stopped him by placing a hand on his arm and firmly moving it to his side, then Natalie had very deliberately and forcefully kissed him. The move had managed to surprise him—in fact, it had surprised *her* at the time. His hands had lifted to her shoulders and he'd kissed her carefully, more lips than mouth, as if to spare her the taste of the blood and spare himself the fear of her loathing.

Knowing that she had to prove to him that her love was unconditional, Natalie had brought her own hands up to his face and kissed him ardently. There had to be no question in his mind that she loved him—despite the vampire—and that she made no distinctions between what he was and who he was. Despair had to be banished from their coupling. So she'd thrown herself into the kiss, matching the intensity he'd shown at the doorway to the bedroom. She'd forced the issue by pressing herself against him, placing her arms around his neck to hold him there, then dared to ignore the boundaries of sense and caution. She'd trusted him and she'd needed him to know and understand that, just as she needed him to know and understand how deeply and desperately she'd wanted *him*. Sex between them had been no act of pity

or compassion—it had been love, a physical manifestation of what they'd felt for one another.

There had been—surprisingly enough—a limit to even Nick's pigheaded attempt to remain mired in despair and self-loathing. When he tried to turn his head and break away, she'd pursued him with her kisses, dropped her fingers from his neck to grasp his hands and settle them around her waist. It was a battle he couldn't have hoped to win—he'd wanted her too badly and his body had betrayed him, responding to her just as she'd responded to his touch earlier. If he was ever going to cross back over to mortality, he'd have to learn to fight his conviction that nothing good could ever happen to him and that if it did, it couldn't last, or he'd destroy it, or he simply didn't deserve it and someone would end up paying.

Natalie had understood. If they'd ever actually compared notes, he'd win for more time spent indulging in that delusion, but only because he had a seven hundred and seventy year head-start over her. As well as she'd understood the problem, she'd understood the solution that he'd unknowingly given her—she had to share her joy with him, convince him that they deserved the pleasure they could give one another.

His shaft had hardened, pressed between them, and she'd caught a glimpse of gold in his eyes when she'd managed to open her own. Carefully, Natalie had maneuvered Nick's back to the bed, then prodded him toward it, one forceful kiss at a time. As they'd passed the nightstand, she'd had enough conscious thought remaining to snag the small package of condoms he'd left there, making a mental note to applaud his foresight.

It was when they'd reached the point when they couldn't move any farther—the back of Nick's thighs pressed against the side of the bed—that he finally escaped the onslaught of her mouth long enough to sit down. Natalie had backed away then, still standing, to check out the situation. When Nick's hand had reached for her own to draw her to him, she'd given him the package of condoms.

The gold never left his eyes, even though he was somewhat bemused by the sudden appearance of the package in his hand. Natalie had laughed at his expression and—now that she'd gotten a good look at the package—his choice of protection. Whether he'd chosen the 'extra-strong, long-lasting' brand out of some sense of inflated male ego, his cautious nature when it came to protecting her, or out of complete ignorance, she couldn't be sure.

His confusion had turned almost instantly to dread at her obvious hesitation and amusement. "These—there *are* right, aren't they?" he'd asked, his voice more than a little rough-edged with lust.

"They're fine," she'd insisted. Natalie had seated herself on the bed beside him and placed an arm around his shoulder. "Although I'd really wanted to go shopping with you."

"So you could watch me embarrass myself?"

"But you're so *cute* when you turn red." She'd emphasized the point by reaching up to pinch Nick's cheek lightly, then gestured toward the package. "Go on."

He'd attempted to open the package by tearing the plastic seal along the top, but it hadn't worked. With two hands, he'd managed one, hard pull . . . .

Condoms had sailed into the air and fallen like rain for at least three or four seconds. She hadn't been able to control her laughter and even threatened to choke when Nick looked at her with a sheepish smile, two or three small plastic packages in his hair. He'd laughed as well, falling back onto the bed and she'd joined him there, taking a moment to pick the condoms out of his curls, then brushing the others from the bed. "You are *never* going to convince your cleaning people that you're not into major kinky stuff, now."

Nick had turned on his side and rescued one of the small packages before she flicked it off the bed. "I've got it covered."

"How?"

"Doubled their tip."

"Speaking of getting it covered—" Natalie had touched her finger to his nose playfully, then gestured along the length of his body. "You need any help with that?"

"*Need*? No," he'd said quickly, his expression mocking indignation. "Nat, I'm *not* a kid. I've been around."

"I don't doubt *that*." She'd sat up, trying to hide her wry smile and remain serious—it wasn't working. "I just meant . . . well, when was the last time you used one? *Before* last week," she'd added quickly, catching the sudden gleam in his eye.

Nick had held the small package up as if inspecting it. "Um . . . maybe a decade?"

"A decade?"

He'd grinned at her raised eyebrow and the disapproval in her tone of voice. "I don't think we want to get into *that* conversation right now, do you?"

She'd hesitated, giving the matter serious thought, then nodded slightly and smiled. "You're right. Where were we, again?"

"You'd asked if I needed help with this." He'd held the condom out to her, then pulled it back quickly when she'd reached for it. "And I'd said no—I didn't *need* help. But—" he'd leaned forward and planted a kiss lightly on her lips, "I wouldn't mind your assistance."

"If you want a cheerleader, I'm sorry but I left my pom-poms at home."

"Not from where I'm sitting."

His grin had been the only acknowledgment of the sharp slap she gave his shoulder, but she didn't mind. It had been good to see him shake off those dark thoughts and to free him from the despairing depths into which he'd always seemed all to willing to fall. Scooting from the bed, she'd watched as he sat upright, feet on the floor. He'd torn the seal off the plastic wrapper with extreme care, tossed the wrapper onto the floor, then held the condom in the palm of his hand.

"Shall I do the honors?" she'd asked, picking up the condom between her thumb and forefinger as if it were a delicate object.

For a moment she'd seen that serious look in his eyes again—that ultra-caution. Of course he'd been worried; he wasn't chained down yet. The last time she'd touched him in this fashion, he'd been manacled to the bed and she'd been perfectly safe. But Natalie had been certain that they were still working within safety limits.

She'd knelt down in front of him quickly, before he could protest. His erection had softened slightly, but he was still hard enough that she'd decided that she wouldn't have to worry about the condom slipping off later. Just in case, she'd run her fingertip lightly along the underside of his shaft.

Nick had jumped at her touch—for an instant, she thought he was going to fall right off the bed. His hand had reached down, catching her wrist, and when she'd looked up at him his eyes were very wide, the irises completely gold. "Nat—"

"Don't be such a 'fraidy-cat." She'd slapped at his hand, knocking it away, then placed the condom just at the head of his shaft. Nick had leaned his hands back on the bed—she'd smiled when she'd noticed that he was clutching at the silk sheets with his fingertips, like a drowning man clinging to a life raft. When she'd looked up, she'd expected to see his eyes closed or that he'd looked away, staring at the ceiling or the wall.

He'd been watching her intently, his breathing more than a little ragged. Giving him what she hoped was a comforting smile, she'd begun to roll the condom down over him, her fingers gliding along the slick surface easily. Once the condom was in place, Nick had started to breathe somewhat normally again, but only until she rose to her feet and pushed lightly against his chest, in an attempt to get him to lie down on the bed.

"'Fraidy cat?" he'd asked in a mocking tone, as he'd risen to a sitting position, then bent almost double to snap the metal cuff around his right ankle.

Natalie had seated herself at the end of the bed. Once again, she'd placed her hand on his chest, pushing him back against the sheets. "What's the matter? You've got a complaint?"

"No complaints," he'd said quickly.

"Good. 'Cause I want to take a shot at these." She'd lifted the padded cuff and fit it around his ankle, then started to turn the bolt. "Can you believe that some people actually do this for *fun*?"

He hadn't answered, nor had he raised more than a token resistance at her fastening the bolts instead of letting him do it. Remembering the aftermath from last time and his reaction to having been chained, she'd decided that it was *her* turn to be cautious. She had to distract him from his immediate predicament.

Having his foot in her hand had given her an idea. Turning toward him, Natalie had held his foot in her lap and began to massage it gently, from beneath the ankle and down the ball of the foot, to a careful and tentative questing along the sole—she knew he was ticklish and didn't want to set off any vampiric responses.

"What . . . are you doing?" Nick had asked, a tremor in his voice.

She'd stopped instantly at the question and looked up at him. His hands were linked together and resting behind his head, on the pillow. He'd still been wearing his bathrobe, which was parted slightly. If anything, he'd appeared relaxed. "Does this bother you?"

He'd taken a breath as she ran her finger experimentally down the arch of his foot. "Actually, it's driving me crazy."

"Good." Smiling to herself, Natalie returned to the job at hand. She wet her fingers in her mouth, tracing light lines down the sole of his foot with her nails, then separating each of his toes. Massaging each one from the joint to the nail with moist fingers took a few seconds, but she was rewarded when she felt the muscle in his calf tense, then relax against her. Scurrying over him, and flipping her bathrobe out of the way so that it wouldn't be trapped beneath her, Natalie had followed the same procedure with his left foot, fastening the cuff, then massaging the basic muscles one at a time. When she'd sneaked looks at him, she found that Nick's breathing was slow, if a bit forced, and that his eyes were closed. It was only after his left calf muscle finally relaxed against her that she sat back on her heels and waited for some response.

Nick propped himself up on his elbows and stared at her, shaking his head in wonder. "What *was* that?"

"Didn't you like it?"

His hesitation had spoken more eloquently than anything. "I think—I think my feet are happy."

"Let's see what we can do about the rest of you, then." Natalie had crawled up the bed, careful to avoid his erection—which was still pretty prominent considering that it hadn't received any direct attention for a while . . . so maybe

Nick *had* known what he was doing when he'd bought the 'long-lasting' condoms—and sat up alongside his ribcage. She'd leaned down, stealing a quick kiss from him, then took his hand in her own and gently massaged his right wrist. "If we don't have any problems, I was thinking that we might try something else with the wrist cuffs—maybe change the restraints to your elbows and upper arms. It would free up your hands."

His fingers had closed around her own. "I wouldn't mind having my hands free."

"I'll bet." With as much care as she could manage, she'd stretched his arm flat and locked the wrist cuff in place. When Nick had turned his head, his attention moving to his expectation of her fastening the other cuff, Natalie lowered her mouth to his captured right hand and began to suck on his tip of his index finger.

His entire body had jerked in response, the chains on his leg cuffs rattling. His eyes had closed again, clenched shut. "Nat—"

Slipping his finger out of her mouth, she'd said, "Hang on a second—I'm busy," then proceeded to suck on his index finger again. She'd taken her time as she moved from finger to finger, pausing to give the knuckle of his thumb a little nibble, then finally planting a kiss on his palm.

Nick's eyes had opened again, watching her with a golden look that had to be a cross between adoration and frustration. "You're torturing me, aren't you?" he'd asked hoarsely, as she returned to lean her back against his chest. "For all the times I didn't take my vitamins, or wouldn't drink the protein shakes—"

Leaning forward, she'd silenced him with a soft and tender kiss, taking great pains not to show him that she could still taste the blood on his breath. His free hand had reached up to stroke her hair. "If I could get my hands on you . . . ," he'd whispered, his voice trailing off.

"You already have. Payback's a bitch, isn't it?" This time, she'd kissed the tip of his nose, rolled over his chest, then proceeded to work give his left hand the same sort of attention. By the time she'd reached his pinkie, he was moaning low in his throat, but his eyes were still open and still watching her, solid gold . . . with no sign of red.

Fairly certain that she'd taken his mind off the more unpleasant aspects of his restraints, Natalie had leaned down and rested her head on his chest for a moment. He'd lifted his head, smiling.

"What?" she'd asked.

"Your hair . . . it's so soft."

She'd smiled in response, her hand idly tracing circles on his chest. He'd show such restraint—more than she would have thought possible. There was only one piece left to fasten. "Nick, about the collar—"

"Put it on."

"But I don't think—"

"Put it on," he'd repeated, his voice suddenly so tight and devoid of emotion that she wondered if she'd made a mistake and had undone all the good that she'd meant to do for him. His expression softened and he'd closed his eyes as if weary, his head falling back against the pillow. "Please?"

There was no way she could have turned done such a pitiful entreaty, no matter how badly it made her heart ache. Raising herself slightly, Natalie had placed the collar around his neck. She'd waited until his eyes had opened, then bent to kiss him as the metal catch snapped shut, hoping to drown out that final, awful sound. She'd fixed the bolt in place with her right hand and ran her left through Nick's hair, so soft and still slightly damp, curling as it dried.

The kiss had deepened, grown more ardent as she'd lain there, her body pressed against his, flesh against flesh or terricloth. She'd forced herself to break contact, to settled him down with short, sharp kisses, yet each time his head moved up to follow her, the collar allowing him to go just so far, and no farther. Bending down again, she'd kissed him between breaths, whispering, "Try not—to control it—enjoy it—this time. For me—please. Look at me—I want you—to look at me—watch me."

She'd slid down his chest, just a bit, far enough to find his nipples with her hands. Her hand teased and stroked, and pinched lightly as she'd continued to kiss him, to nibble the length of his jaw and kiss just behind his ear. Her fingers had explored the layers of muscle through his skin and she slid her body further down, as if she could memorize him through her fingertips.

His eyes had stayed open this time, as she'd asked, although now and again he'd close them, just as he moaned or moved beneath her. She'd paused at his ribs and sat up astride him, knowing how ticklish he was, when he'd said faintly, "Nat . . . are you cold?"

Placing the flat of her hand against his chest, she'd brushed the edge of his nipple. "You tell me."

A slight moan and a smile had been his immediate answer. "Could you take off your robe? I want to see you. If I can't touch you, I *need* to see you."

Without a second's thought, she slid the robe back from her shoulders, shrugging it from her skin. The room was so warm that she'd barely noticed the difference in temperature and then only for a second, now that the sheen on her skin was more sweat than water from the shower. Her nipples responded to the change, hardening at the sudden chill and the light brush of the

terricloth—it sent a small shiver through her and she wriggled against Nick's lower torso. He shifted in response, with enough force to raise the weight of both of their bodies from the bed momentarily.

Natalie had lifted herself carefully, settling her weight on one of his thighs as she examined the situation. She'd placed her hand around the base of Nick's shaft and squeezed lightly—from his groan she guessed that he was more than ready for her. This time, she hadn't had to prepare him at all, which she'd actually found somewhat disappointing. No matter what she'd done for him so far, nothing could match what he'd done for her in the shower.

It was then she'd remembered something that she'd heard and had thought about, but never really gotten a chance to try—a pressure point just between the base of the penis and the scrotum. She'd looked up and found that Nick's head was flat against the pillow, his eyes open and staring at the ceiling, which gave her second thoughts. Physically, it wouldn't have hurt him, even if he'd been mortal. But still— "If I hurt you, tell me to stop."

His breathing was ragged again, barely controlled. Somehow, he forced his head upward, straining against the collar. "Nat—if you don't do—something soon—you can just go ahead—and kill me."

"Well you asked for it," she'd mumbled under her breath. Straddling his torso, she'd placed a knee to either side of his body, then lifted herself to allow his shaft to enter her. Still well-lubricated from the private party he'd given her in the shower, his erection had slid into her easily and she'd felt him shudder beneath her. She'd sank down upon him slowly, giving herself a chance to accommodate him—somehow, he felt larger this time—and to give him a chance to accustom himself to her weight. Placing her hands on his stomach, she'd lifted herself slightly from him, just far enough to get her hand behind herself, to find his scrotum.

It had been touch and go and first, but she knew she'd found the spot almost instantly from Nick's sharp intake of breath. She'd pressed two of the fingers of her right hand against the spot, shifted her weight to find a less awkward position, then began to move slowly. Her breasts had bobbed lightly against her chest as she'd risen up, then down again, relying on her left hand for balance and her leg muscles for movement—it had suddenly occurred to her that she'd soon have fabulous muscle tone in her calves and thighs if she and Nick made this a habit and this was a *lot* more enjoyable than exercising on the stairmaster had ever been.

When she'd found the pace she was seeking, she'd almost forgotten herself and released the pressure point, but remembered to maintain pressure in time. She'd concentrated on the rocking motion, all the while watching him. Unlike the first time, he was trying to keep his eyes open, trying to watch her. Occasionally he'd shut them and she'd see him close him eyes tightly, his jaw setting in an odd, strained fashion that let her know that he was fighting instinct, fighting the emergence of his fangs. It was almost impossible, what she'd asked him to do—for vampires, the act of procreation involved fangs and blood. She'd wondered if she was forcing him into a battle he'd never be able to win. But then his eyes would open again and he'd smile, however faintly, before groaning as another wave of sensation shuddered through his frame.

Not that he hadn't been doing wonders for her, too. Time and again she'd lifted herself to the very tip of his shaft, only to sink slowly downward again, or to drop her weight upon him hurriedly, impaling herself upon him, depending on the rhythm of the moment. She had felt the tension building within her, a tingling sensation of anticipation spreading throughout her body with each rise and fall, with each thrust.

After a time, Nick had begun to breathe through his mouth, his chest rising and falling dramatically beneath her hand. His eyes had been distant, his voice confused and broken as he'd groaned anxiously, "I can't—I can't—"

His body had been straining beneath her; his thigh muscles had been taut and hard. He should have climaxed, but couldn't. And Natalie had known why—the pressure point had done the trick.

Then, she'd removed her fingers from the spot.

Even as her right hand had moved away to grip his thigh, she'd felt his scrotum jump against her fingers, drawing close to the base of his shaft. Distantly, she'd felt him twitch within her; she'd wandered away from herself as she'd followed the rising tide of passion, her body lost in sensation as she'd unwittingly dug her nails into the flesh of his thighs and chest. She'd cried out when the sudden thrill shuddered through her, then heard the echoing roar of Nick's voice as he'd found his hard-won release.

For an eternal moment, it had all been sensation, from the joy at having brought him to the edge and then beyond that, of having given Nick something unexpected, to the pleasure he'd given her. If anything, her second orgasm of the evening had seemed to pick up where the first had left off. She'd felt exhausted, sated, but enervated after the shower. The second time had been more intense and enveloping, her nerve endings tingling, her body almost numb with sustained pleasure.

And then, wonder of wonders, he'd remained hard, still pumping within her. Although she'd thought she couldn't stir her leg muscles into action to take advantage of his sustained erection, another wave moved through her, causing her entire body to shiver. Automatically, her hands had planted themselves on either side of his chest and she'd gripped the slippery sheets in

her fingernails, raising herself slightly as Nick continued to thrust upward, still coming within her. She heard him gnash his teeth and managed to open her eyes enough to catch a glimpse of his fangs as he shouted, his head thrown back violently against the pillow.

Only the mismatched sounds of their panting and ragged breathing had broken the silence that fell afterwards, punctuated by a low, satisfied groan from Nick as he gave one final twitch within her, then fell back and lay still. Natalie had fallen against him and had slipped off his softening shaft to rest her head against his chest. A chill had stolen over her, goose pimples raising amongst the sheen of sweat on her skin, and she'd fought the urge to sink into the oblivion of afterglow—she had to release Nick's arms, she had to prevent his panic of the last time.

Her fingers were slick with sweat and some blood—she'd pierced his skin with her nails—as she'd unfastened the bolt that held his right wrist chain in place. Even when the cuff had sprung free, Nick hadn't moved, still lying with eyes closed, silent . . . although his mouth opened slightly and his chest rose with a long, shuddering breath. She'd rolled over him, falling to the other side of the bed, and quickly undid the second bolt.

As she'd turned to face him, pressed against the length of his body, his arms moved around her, holding her. But she'd known that it wasn't quite the time to rest—the bolt on the neck collar was the final piece of the puzzle. It had been released with a snap. Only then had she dared to cuddle against his shoulder and chest, sheltered within the circle of his arms. She'd felt his lips press against her hair, his uneven breath whispering against her ear, and sighed, closing her eyes and enjoying the remnants of sensation that still swept through her, the warm tingle that still resounded through her body.

"That," said Nick softly, voice hoarse, "was wonderful."

His arms had pressed even more tightly around her, but Natalie's eyes had remained closed as she'd basked in the comforting embrace, in a pleasant darkness somewhere between waking and dreaming. "Mmmm," she'd murmured, not trusting herself to be any more articulate at the moment. There had been no fear in her, only a complete sense of serenity, absolute and total trust. If she'd shivered just a little, feeling his cool skin against her own burning warmth, it was because of the cold.

One of Nick's arms had released her and she'd muttered a faint sound of protest, her eyelashes fluttering as he'd shifted position, but then a blanket had settled over them. Much as she'd wanted to remain awake, she couldn't quite fight her way back to full consciousness, drowsing against him, secure and warm and content beneath the blanket, his hand lightly rubbing back and forth along her shoulder. There had been no absolute moment when she'd fallen asleep, just a steady drifting into nothingness . . . .

Until she'd sat up suddenly in Nick's bed, alone, the covers falling away from her. She'd managed no more than a quiet sound of worry and disappointment before she'd seen him standing in the doorway.

Nick had been wearing his pajamas, dressing gown, and a wide, if tender, smile. She'd smiled back automatically as he'd walked over to the bed and she'd leaned back against the pillows and drawn the blankets up to her neck, as much for the warmth they'd provided as the sudden realization that he was at least partially dressed and she was completely naked.

"Hi," he'd said lightly, seating himself on the bed and leaning forward to kiss her.

"Hi, yourself." It was a soft, caressing kiss—the kind she'd found she'd liked the best, knowing that it signified just how much he cherished her. His hair was barely damp and he smelled of soap and cologne—he'd showered and shaved.

When the kiss had ended, he'd sat up and lifted her hands in his own, playing with her fingers. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished," she'd announced immediately, not even stopping to wonder why that might be the case after the fabulous, romantic dinner she'd eaten . . . how many hours before? Automatically, she'd turned to glance at the clock on the nightstand, then frowned as she'd realized that it was only eleven o'clock. She'd arrived at six . . . .

"It's morning," Nick had announced, with a certain amount of glee at her astonishment. He'd reached out his hand to ruffle her hair. "Sleepy-head. Come on—I've got coffee ready for you. And your omelet is just about done."

Natalie had taken a deep breath, the sharp and unmistakable scent of fresh coffee having wafted up to the second floor, causing her stomach to grumble. She'd flushed in embarrassment, but Nick had pretended he hadn't noticed—or tried to, because there was a certain edge to his smile as he'd looked away that meant he'd heard.

She'd wrinkled her nose, then, recognizing the scent of spent passion clinging to her and the sheets. "I think I'd better take a quick shower. And—no—you can't join me," she'd added quickly, when he'd turned his head as if to speak. "I need to clean up."

"You look beautiful."

His hand had risen to toy with her hair, some of which rested on her bare shoulder. She'd succumbed to the touch for a moment, nudging her head against his hand, then sighed with regret as she shifted her body beneath the covers and the faintest scent of sweat hit her again. "I smell like a horse that's

been ridden hard and put away wet," she'd corrected. "And I feel like one, too. So give me fifteen minutes?"

She'd put just the right note of entreaty in her voice. Nick had leaned forward to kiss her again, then had risen from the bed and headed for the door. "I can't promise that omelet will hold for fifteen minutes," he'd called over his shoulder.

Leaning out of bed, she'd reached down for her bathrobe, which was still lying on the floor from when she'd slipped out of it the night before and had tossed it aside. "Then you eat it," she'd informed him. "You can always make me another one."

He'd turned at her comment, rolling his eyes slightly as if asking heaven for assistance, then headed out into the hallway, thoughtfully closing the door behind him.

That had been a week ago.

Natalie hugged her arms tightly to her chest and grinned at the memory of that very domestic breakfast—the coffee just a little too strong, the omelet brown to the point of being burned at the edges as he'd promised. But she'd eaten every bite of that omelet, even managed to feed Nick a mouthful, which he'd choked down without too much drama. And they'd compared notes of their experiences from the night before.

He'd chided her for taking too many risks; she'd scolded him for holding back and worrying about her when he should have been enjoying himself. They'd both agreed that her experimentation with the pressure point had been much too dangerous—in theory. In practice however . . . Nick had found himself at a loss to describe exactly what he'd felt. His final word on the subject had been to lean across the edge of the table, take her face in his hands, and kiss her fiercely and passionately—which she would have taken as a sign of success if he hadn't paused afterward to spit out the bits of omelet he'd picked up from the brief interaction.

She'd only managed to escape the loft by giving him a brief list of what an annoyed and hungry cat could do to her apartment in her absence—hinting sharply that he'd be responsible for cleaning up the mess if he didn't let her go—and promising, on her honor as a former Girl Guide, that they'd continue their experiment in physical therapy exactly one week to the day, with Nick offering to pay for boarding Sydney at the most exclusive cat hostel in Toronto in case she decided to extend their practice session.

Their second week at work had gone better, Nick having lost some of the edge that had been driving his friends and co-workers insane for so long, but also having adapted to the novelty of this new experience and managing *not* to smile incessantly. There had been flowers again—her apartment was quickly assuming the look of a flower show in high gear—and he'd taken to kissing her on the cheek whenever he caught her in the lab or at the station. She'd given him a stern talking to about proper behavior at crime scenes and he'd avoided that impropriety, as well as a possible lecture from Reese.

Due to Nick's attitude and actions, hiding their relationship was out of the question. She often got a 'thumbs-up' sign from some of the female officers and staff when she entered the station and tried to handle the situation with the graceful acceptance and good humor it deserved. It wasn't long before she decided that *everyone* in Toronto knew, especially when she received a slightly chatty and oblique note from Myra, who'd bantered for two pages about how she and Jenny were settling into their new home near her immediate family in Ottawa and hinting between the lines that she'd heard congratulations might be in order in the near future.

The memory of that note sobered her somewhat. With Schanke gone—and how she'd wished that he'd lived long enough to have seen his partner finally find some joy with her—Nick didn't have any close friends with which he could share his happiness. The loss of Schanke and Cohen had made him more cautious in drawing close to his co-workers; he knew their names, acknowledged their birthdays and their success and losses just as he'd always done . . . but he'd placed a distance between himself and the mortals that surrounded him. It was as if the deaths of those two had brought home the fragility of those relationships. He'd even almost succeeded in driving her away. But even as the distance between himself and the mortals in his world now seemed to increase, and he'd allowed her back into that inner circle, sharing his thoughts and feelings with her, she knew that it wasn't the same.

She had Grace, a few old friends from school . . . but at least she had an outlet for her frustration and her fears and her happiness, even if she did have to massage a few of the details into the realm of believability. Nick had no one except her. Being one of the two halves that composed this relationship made it impossible for him to express some of the things she knew he would have shared with Schanke.

Natalie smoothed down her length of her dress consciously as the elevator door opened—they were going dancing and she'd chosen to wear something just a shade slinkier and sexier than she was used to. It was black and silky and clung to her like a second skin. The 'merry widow' Grace had dared her into wearing somehow didn't cause a ripple in the line of the dress, although it did create an illusion of cleavage that she'd only ever been endowed with in a few select and very embarrassing dreams.

Unlike the last time, the loft was silent and there was no sign of Nick. Although the light in the kitchen was on, he hadn't bothered with any of the

others, which was unusual. Unless he was wallowing in depression and self-pity, he kept the loft brightly lit at night, as if he were trying to recreate the pretense of daylight.

A glance at her watch told her it was a few minutes before eight—so she wasn't too early (Grace had cautioned her about appearing too eager). She stepped out of the elevator and into the loft, holding the door open for a moment and pausing, before letting it slide shut behind her. The shutters over the windows were still closed and, spotting the remote on a chair, she walked over, picked it up, and pressed the button to release them.

The mechanism hummed and they began to lift, letting the night and the soft lights of the city into the loft. It was at that moment that she heard his voice call her name in a short, sharp cry that echoed throughout the loft.

"Nat!"

It went through her like lightening—she knew something was wrong instantly, not only because the cry was cut off so sharply, but from the tone of it. Instinct told her to run, to head for the door and not stop until she was home, safe in her apartment.

Natalie found herself turning in the direction of the elevator, but froze and steeled herself. Slipping the chain of her purse from her shoulder, she tossed it to the couch and headed for the stairs to the second level at a run, her heels clicking against the floor, then the sound was muffled by the carpet.

There was a blur, an instant of disorientation . . . and *he* was there, at the foot of the stairs.

Lucien LaCroix, or so he'd introduced himself to her in the restaurant on Valentine's Day. Nick's master. And, on at least two recent occasions of which she was aware, his protector and savior.

She met his gaze evenly, fighting back her fear, letting her anger and concern for Nick take precedence. He was dressed in black, his somber splendor making his skin seem even more pale than it was, accentuating the faint brown of his close-cropped hair and the red of his lips. His eyes were as she remembered them—gray and what she imagined soul-less to look like.

He'd reached forward to take her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing her knuckles with an air of gallantry. "Dr. Lambert—good evening. How kind of you to drop by. And how stunning you look!"

Snatching her hand from his grasp, she backed away a step—but no farther. "Where's Nick? What have you done to him?"

He clasped his hands in front of him and gave an apologetic sigh. "I'm afraid Nick has had to cancel your plans for the evening. He feels dreadful about not being able to give you any advance warning. Something . . . came up." He glanced over his shoulder and toward the second story, his conciliatory demeanor banished by a sly smile.

The smile sent a chill through Natalie. "I want to see him." She took a few steps, intending to brush past LaCroix.

He caught her arm in a firm grip, holding her in place, his face inches from her own. "I fear that wouldn't be wise. He's rather tied up at the moment." His eyes narrowed. "It would be best if you left. Immediately."

Something in her chest fluttered—she realized it was her heart skipping a beat. She hesitated, letting her arm drop to her side in confusion as she looked away from him, her gaze going directly to the elevator.

He was letting her go. He wasn't going to hurt her. He wasn't going to keep her here.

He was letting her go.

He *wanted* her to leave.

Natalie drew herself up to her full height and wrenched her arm from his grasp. She glared at him and announced, "I'm not leaving until I see Nick."

Almost immediately, she realized that her answer was the one he'd anticipated. He regarded her with a thoughtful look and asked, almost kindly, "Are you certain? You may not like what you find."

Words failed her, her mouth drying up at the implication of his statement. She nodded slowly, but deliberately.

"Very well," answered LaCroix, still maintaining an air of civility. He looped his elbow through her own, taking her arm, then patted it with his other hand as he led her up the stairs. "I'd known Nicholas was up to something, you see—I *always* know. He doesn't understand that. He refused to tell me at first. But you'd be surprised at how garrulous he became once he overcame his initial reservations about the matter. I must admit, that I'm *very* impressed. Your solution to Nicholas' problem was ingenious. Misguided, perhaps, but ingenious."

They'd reached the bedroom—the door was closed. Natalie tried to swallow and found that she couldn't get past the lump of fear in her throat . . . fear not for herself, but for Nick. LaCroix wouldn't have killed him. She'd seen too recently how LaCroix, in his own way, cared for Nick.

But from what little Nick had told her over the past few years and what she'd guessed, filling in between the lines, LaCroix also had very strong ideas about what Nick *should* be. He wanted Nick to give up his quest for mortality, to accept his vampire nature and shrug off the compassion and guilt that had kept him from drinking human blood as a steady diet, or from killing for food for at least a century. She also knew that in the past LaCroix's response to Nick's 'transgressions' had been the most extreme end of 'tough love,' bordering

on brutality and sadism. The fact that their antagonism had been less physically violent since LaCroix's recent reappearance had given her some hope that LaCroix was learning that Nick couldn't be beaten into submission.

That hope fled from her as she met LaCroix's eyes, then looked at the closed bedroom door.

Gently, LaCroix took her hand in his and glanced down at it. "You do realize, this is of your own doing," he said, his tone a soft admonishment. "What you'll see, you've brought about by your own will."

The retort formed on her lips—she was more than prepared to tell him that *she* wasn't Nick, she couldn't be driven into guilt or despair quite so easily. But as those cold, gray, almost . . . sympathetic eyes finally met her own, the words faltered and died. Because in his eyes she saw some of the truth.

Yes, she'd pushed Nick into this. She'd never considered what LaCroix's response might be, never thought to warn Nick. Or, if he'd even thought about the consequences of what they were doing, she'd never thought that he might dismiss LaCroix's probable reaction to his betrayal of his true nature to make her happy.

It was a sudden understanding that both saddened and frightened her, a weight that settled over her heart, making it difficult to breathe. LaCroix smiled slightly in response, his expression almost sad. "Ah, so I see you *do* understand," he'd whispered.

Then he'd placed her hand over the doorknob.

Natalie glanced at him again as he stood at her shoulder. She turned the knob firmly, took a deep breath, and gave the door a push.

It opened easily. She glanced at LaCroix, but he stepped to one side and gestured for her to enter—still playing at civility and gallantry. If anything, his attitude brought her anger to the fore. She took two solid strides into the room—

Then stopped.

Nick was lying on the bed, naked, spread-eagled in the restraints, the chains drawn more tightly than the use for which they'd been intended. She could see the strain in his muscles—there was no slack or give in the restraints. In addition, his chest had been strapped to the bed and a metal bar had been fixed between his thighs, taking some of the strain from the pull of the chains, but holding his legs apart at a distance that couldn't be anything but painful.

He'd raised his head as she'd entered—barely. The padded collar that she'd found for him had been replaced by another and it, too, had been fixed to a chain that pulled it taut to prevent any movement. He hadn't been able to speak because there was some sort of gag in his mouth. She knew it had been fixed firmly because his shouts at her emerged as little more than muffled groans. But the cruelest of all was the leather device buckled over his shaft.

She'd been a coroner long enough to have seen more than a few S & M or bondage related deaths—some accidental and others the most sadistic form of homicide, death by torture. She'd taken the requisite courses during her training, her main goal initially to keep from snickering at the various toys and devices consenting and non-consenting adults employed upon one another in the name of 'good, clean fun.' Her experience and her education had aided her in choosing the restraint system she'd proposed to Nick, which they'd found to be effective. But the restraint employed on his groin was something she never would have suggested and would have adamantly refused to use, no matter what the situation.

It was called a 'cock cage,' among other, certainly no less descriptive terms on the street. The straps were composed of leather and elastic. It was supposed to be strapped over the penis and scrotum at the first stirrings of an erection, the straps pulled taut and fastened. Technically, it performed as advertised—prolonged an erection by restricting the backflow of blood from the penis and delayed ejaculation by holding the scrotum away from the body and the base of the shaft. The true extent of the insidious nature of the device depended on the user—the straps could be fastened tightly before the erection reached its apex, constricting the penis and causing pain. She'd seen devices which had barbs along the inside of the straps, supposedly for 'stimulation.' And the strap around the scrotum could be drawn so tightly that it would prevent ejaculation until it was removed, thus keeping the victim in a state of increasingly painful arousal, but denying him any climax or ejaculation until the strap was withdrawn.

From where she stood, it seemed the 'cage' hadn't been applied too long before—Nick was well on his way to an erection and the straps had been pulled so tightly that they were already digging into his shaft. She had no way of knowing whether they had barbs on the interior and neither could she tell immediately whether the scrotum strap was in place, but she also guessed that LaCroix wouldn't miss inflicting a little more pain on his 'son.'

Her fury burned white hot within her and she was torn between screaming at LaCroix or helping Nick—but common sense prevailed and she took a step toward the bed, intent on freeing him from the device and the restraints immediately.

She heard a groan from Nick on the bed, which might have been a warning. A hand clamped down on her shoulder turning her slightly, but prevented her from moving.

"When Nicholas had mentioned his new 'toys,' I'll admit that I was

somewhat intrigued," said LaCroix, his voice still even, cultured and civil, as if they were discussing the weather or some other innocuous subject. "I refused to believe that such a thing was possible. But Nicholas assured me that you and he had been intimate on more than one occasion . . . and that you'd remained unharmed. He's yet to taste your blood."

He raised an eyebrow and smiled at her. "Of course, I was skeptical and demanded a demonstration. Which Nicholas has, however reluctantly, provided." LaCroix gestured toward Nick—she could see him straining against the cuffs, biceps bulging with the effort . . . only to fall back to the beg, panting through the gag in the aftermath of his exertion. "I thought I'd repay his cooperation with a few 'gifts' for his collection. It's amazing how medieval they are, considering the age."

"Let him go." She managed to force the words out from between her clenched teeth, then, emboldened, turned to glare at him and all but shouted, "Let him go, now!"

LaCroix didn't flinch, acknowledging her demand with the barest flicker of an eyebrow, as if amused. "Ah, but you see . . . I still haven't gotten my demonstration of Nicholas' new-found 'control.'" He released her, then walked to the side of the bed, his back toward her. "I thought that I might have to find some way to encourage Nicholas' enthusiasm for a proper test. He'd seemed a bit anxious—but that didn't seem out of the ordinary, Nicholas being Nicholas. His squeamishness about such things is so monumental, it's almost wearying."

He reached forward. She couldn't see what his was doing, because his body blocked her vision, but she could see Nick's face and could easily guess. Nick turned his head away from her in humiliation as best as the collar allowed and made some sort of noise through the gag, his fingers clenching into fists and his legs jerking in the shackles. She saw streaks of blood on his neck as his head turned and realized that the collar, too, had barbs or protrusions along the inside.

Turning back to her, LaCroix held out his hands, as if trying to puzzle out a problem. "He was cooperative, at first—*too* cooperative. I see why, now. He never mentioned that he'd expected your arrival. He was hoping that I'd finish with him before you returned, leaving him to your tender mercies after I was gone."

The anger allowed her to get past the lump in her throat, the flush of humiliation and misery from Nick more than enough impetus to give her the strength to face down LaCroix. "Haven't you done enough?" she demanded. "You've made your point. Now get the hell out of here!"

She pointed toward the door, but LaCroix didn't budge. He'd simply smiled again. "Such high drama? I'll be more than happy to leave . . . if—"

The word hung between them for a moment. Natalie simply stared, knowing a trap when she saw one. "If?" she prompted, when LaCroix didn't seem inclined to answer.

"If I'm given the demonstration I was promised."

There were too many variables involved—LaCroix's cool demeanor did nothing to set her at ease. "Which is—?"

"I want to see how your little apparatus—" he gestured over his shoulder, toward the bed, "functions. In practical terms."

The chill she'd felt earlier returned. Natalie stared straight into LaCroix's eyes. "If you want me to admit that we've had sex—yes, we have. Twice."

She'd thrown in the last word with an edge of defiance. It seemed to amuse him. LaCroix frowned slightly and moved away from the bed, taking a step closer to her. "Not that I doubt your veracity, but I *would* like to see for myself. Certainly, you can understand my difficulty; I never rely on second-hand information."

It took a minute for his words to sink in. Natalie couldn't believe what he was asking. "You mean—you want me to have sex with Nick. And . . . you want to watch?"

"Isn't that what I proposed?" A moan from the bed caught his attention and he shot a look over his shoulder, then glanced back at her again. "Of course, I'm not going to compel you, Natalie. I *may* call you that, we are on a first name basis by now, surely, having Nicholas in common?" He took another step toward her, so that they were less than a foot apart. "You can leave at any time."

"If I leave, you'll leave?" she asked tentatively.

LaCroix's smile made the lump in her throat seem even larger. "I never said *that*." He stood beside her, his gaze moving to Nick, who was still restrained on the bed and still fighting, although his efforts seemed weaker. "No. I suppose I'll stay with Nicholas for a time. He *did* promise me a demonstration and I'm certain he doesn't want to disappoint me." Shrugging, he met her gaze. "I'm certain we'll work out *something*."

That was it, then. LaCroix had placed the problem squarely in her hands—either she stayed and had sex with Nick while he watched, or she left and he did . . . whatever he pleased.

"If I stay," she said slowly, purposely averting her eyes from Nick, who was staring at her in horror, trying to shout through his gag. "*If* I stay . . . we need to set a few ground rules."

"Of course."

He acquiesced so easily that Natalie was instantly suspicious. One glance at Nick, however, who seemed to have given up his struggle and was simply staring at her, was enough to firm her resolve. She turned toward LaCroix, prepared to play hard ball. "You don't interfere. You don't touch either one of us. You don't say *anything*. You stay here," she gestured toward the spot by the door, which was, realistically, the furthest he could be from them and still remain in the room, "and you don't move any closer."

LaCroix considered for a moment, his gaze moving past her shoulder, toward Nick. "Agreed."

"I'm *serious*," said Natalie firmly, with enough anger to bring his attention back to her. "I don't want you messing with Nick's head, either, I mean . . . you *know* what I mean," she said, after stumbling slightly over the context of the situation. "When we're through, you leave. Period."

"Agreed." He raised an eyebrow. "Anything else?"

She took a deep breath, still meeting his gaze. "I want your word that you won't harm me, or Nick, in any way. That if we give you your . . . demonstration, this subject is closed. No more 'gifts.' No more 'toys.' You leave us alone."

"You have my word. Regarding this situation only, of course."

She hadn't expected even that much of a concession and was grateful for what she could get. "Of course," she answered, if a bit faintly. Unable to think of anything else, Natalie turned toward the bed.

LaCroix placed a hand on her shoulder, spinning her toward him. "I think it's time you hear *my* terms, don't you agree?"

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard the other shoe hit the floor with a dull thud. Shrugging her shoulder to shake off his grip, she glared at him. "Right. What do you want?"

"You'll have intercourse with Nicholas—take as long as you'd like and do whatever it is you wish to do, I'm in no hurry. But you *will* have intercourse with him."

Her fists clenched at her sides. "I've already said—"

"Do you agree?"

Only the raised eyebrow, the quick words—Natalie fought back her anger and nodded. "Agreed."

LaCroix glanced toward the bed. "You may remove the gag from Nicholas. But all else, all of the restraints, stay as they are now. Agreed?"

Natalie followed his glance toward the bed and felt a fire burn within her at the sight of his body, stretched painfully across the bed as if on a rack. "No. No deal. He's in *pain*, for God's sake—"

"He's in pain for *your* sake . . . neither his nor your God have had anything to do with this." He wasn't smiling now, his expression serious and his tone that of a scolding parent. "Those are *my* terms," said LaCroix, his voice laced with steel. "If you don't agree, you're free to leave at any time."

She ignored his gesture toward the door, still staring at Nick on the bed. His eyes were closed, as if he couldn't believe what they were saying and knowing that he couldn't save her or himself. "Okay, the restraints I can work around. But the cage—"

"Agreed?" pressed LaCroix, his voice quiet, but firm.

She tried not to show the shiver that ran through her at the sight of the leather device. It was bulky, not as stream-lined as others she'd seen in her experience. It would add another half inch to the width of Nick's shaft, at the very least. She'd never actually taken the time to measure him, but knew that they fit well together, which meant that during erection he was between an inch and maybe an inch and a half in width. She guessed that he was maybe seven to eight inches when aroused fully, and the cage would add maybe another half inch to an inch to his length. Also, working under this pressure—namely LaCroix's rapt attention, Nick in agony, and her own dislike of exhibitionism—and without the assistance of Nick's particular attentions to her own pleasure, which had provided more than adequate lubrication in the past, never mentioning the fact that she'd never get a condom over that thing . . . .

This was going to hurt.

And LaCroix knew it.

She met his eyes and swallowed, knowing that he was trying to scare her off.

He was going to find out she didn't scare so easily, especially where Nick was concerned.

"Agreed."

He seemed amused at the strength of her assertion, looking toward the bed. "You must care for him very much, to cause yourself such pain," he'd said softly.

"I love him."

"I believe you do," he admitted, a note of wonder in his voice. Then, LaCroix smiled and gestured toward the bed. "Shall we begin?"

"Give a girl a minute to freshen up, okay?" She gestured toward the bed. "You can take that gag out of his mouth for a start. And loosen those chains for a minute—"

"The chains stay as they are," said LaCroix sharply. "That might motivate you to keep your freshening to a minimum."

Something in him had changed in that instant. Natalie straightened,

realized she was in no position to argue, then nodded. "All right. But the gag comes out now."

She turned and headed for the door, but he caught her arm again, stopping her. Drawing her close to him, he looked into her eyes, as if searching for something. "Nicholas is *mine*," he hissed, "remember that."

Reaching up, she pried his hand from her upper arm and said sharply, "I remember *everything*." And then, before her heart or her courage gave out, she stomped away from him, walked into the bathroom, then slammed the door behind her.

She locked it—no, it wouldn't do any good against vampire strength, but it was the gesture that counted—then her legs buckled and she sat down heavily on the floor, her head resting on the cool tile of the wall. Her parting shot had been a brief victory, but a victory all the same. Let LaCroix wonder about what she did and didn't remember from their confrontation on Valentine's Day.

Not that he didn't have his own problems right now—LaCroix had realized too late that he'd screwed up, big time. What he'd meant as a lesson in discipline and humiliation for Nicholas and a painful warning for her not to meddle in his affairs, had turned into a demonstration of her love for and dedication to Nick. If she carried this off, she'd have broken some of the power LaCroix had over Nick.

She had no doubt Nick had endured worse than this at LaCroix's hands, but he was used to it by now, seemed to accept it as part of the penance for all the wrongs he'd felt he'd committed over the centuries. But her torment and humiliation—this was one thing that Nick wouldn't stand for and wouldn't allow to go unavenged. If LaCroix and Nick had developed an uneasy truce these past few months, it was *still* a truce. LaCroix had overplayed his hand and underestimated her. Nick wouldn't forgive him this, not for a long time.

There was still the matter of getting through this, while causing as little pain as possible to herself and Nick. Every moment she sat here, mulling over the problem, was another few minutes that Nick's muscles were stretched within those chains. Which meant that if she was going to make any preparation, she'd have to hurry.

Natalie quickly slipped her dress over her head, then found herself facing the mirror. She ran her hands down the side of the merry widow, setting it in place as it rode up. The crotch unsnapped easily—an advantage Grace had pointed out during a conversation on the practicalities of fancy lingerie.

Leaning her hands forward on the sink, she took a deep breath. Practicalities. She had to keep her mind on the situation, what she could do to thwart LaCroix. Lubrication was going to be a problem. Unless—

She opened Nick's medicine chest and found it empty, except for the gauze, padding, and antiseptic she kept there for removal of the bullets he forgot to dodge, in addition to his shaving gear. Unlike most mortals, he hadn't acquired a lifetime of free samples and half-used products. With no women in his current life—yeah, that was a fib, but she could use some positive thinking at the moment—there wasn't any aloe-based creams or lotions at hand. Soap, although fine for the shower, wouldn't work well without the water and shampoo served the same problem, not to mention her worry about it getting into the cuts and abrasions once those straps and buckles started to scrape against her more sensitive internal areas. She had the same feeling about the shaving cream.

Closing the medicine chest, she decided she'd wasted enough time. She was left with one very tried-and-true option.

Self-arousal 101.

Catching sight of his dressing gown in the mirror, Natalie turned and took it off the hook. She held it tightly to her and closed her eyes, sniffing. It smelled like Nick—aftershave and sweat. The scent was entirely male and completely him.

Opening her eyes, she slipped her hands through the sleeves. She'd worn this once or twice, when they'd watched videos and she'd fallen asleep on the couch, before they'd dared to safely share anything more than a kiss. Before he'd tried to push her away. Before she'd come up with the hare-brained scheme to further their horizons.

LaCroix was right—this *was* her fault.

She pushed that thought out of her mind and quickly—she could save recrimination and guilt for later. Nick was in pain and whatever LaCroix had promised, she knew he'd find some loophole through which to torment Nick further while she was gone.

Even a quick shower was out of the question; the water might easily wash away a portion of what she needed most. So she folded a towel and placed it on the lid of the commode, then sat down, very carefully moving the edges of the merry widow and Nick's robe behind her and out of the way. She folded another towel—thank God he liked those over-sized bath towels!—and tucked it behind her back for support and comfort.

Closing her eyes, she began with her breasts, stroking her hands across the slinky lingerie. She could feel her nipples begin to harden beneath the cloth, the friction providing extra stimulation. Turning her head, she smelled the aftershave on his bathrobe and felt the silk rub softly against her cheek. She pretended that they were Nick's hands caressing her, that it was Nick who was holding her, loving her.

The touch of his hands and his fingers was different, but she made allowances—it had often surprised her how easily the body could be fooled into a response simply by touch or taste or smell. There were things that she knew about herself that he had yet to discover, sensitive places where the barest breath of a whisper could set her off and other places where a firm, fierce pressure was required to start a fire within her. But that was part of the fun of it, the discovery of one another.

At the moment, discovery had little to do with it—she was treading familiar territory. Even as her fingers wandered down the length of her stomach, caressing her skin through the silky cloth, and then further than that, past the snap and to the opening . . . .

She stroked purposefully and thought of Nick, of the magic his fingers had accomplished and what he had done to her just those two times—was it only two, seeming more like a lifetime?—they'd been together. Not *slept* together in the strictest sense of the term, as she'd discovered the last time, when she'd awakened to breakfast and the discovery that he'd spent the night on the couch, afraid to be so close to her in sleep, afraid that he'd lose control and that she'd never awaken.

Natalie fought back that image—hardly erotic, thinking about one's own murder. But *would* it be murder? She'd had dreams, of course, fantasized about what it *would* be like to surrender herself to him completely, flesh and blood. When she'd thought that the world was coming to an end, that mortal survival was impossible and that she'd have a better chance if she were like him, beside him—

She'd wanted to face the end of the world with him, whatever that entailed. And she came damned close to her own end, foolishly, not in Nick's arms. But he'd saved her and held her . . . then left her before the sun rose, because he didn't trust himself as much as she trusted him.

Now that she knew what it was like to have him, she had some frame of reference. It wasn't difficult to add the other details to the mental picture—his hands on her, caressing her, lips on lips and everywhere else, settling finally at the soft skin at the base of her throat. Her mind could easily combine the two sets of sensations; the memories from that moment on Valentine's Day when he'd denied his love for her, taken her into his arms when she was drugged and half-bewildered, far from her senses, and kissed her for all he was worth, the sharp edges of his fangs playing along her skin, scraping her flesh as a prelude to that final bite . . . add that to what she knew of him, flesh molding against flesh, the pumping and thrusting offset by that silken touch he could employ in just the right spots. It was almost too much to imagine, too great an experience for her to even consider.

The steady circling pressure of her fingers had led to a growing warmth as her mind drifted through thoughts of what had been and what might be or never be. Without realizing it, she found herself on the very edge of the chasm, the hunger for satisfaction and finality rippling through her, driving her fingers faster . . . until her body shuddered in response, waves of pleasure washing over her.

There was no time to savor the feelings that came afterward, such as the soft contentment, the tingle of having known something extraordinary for a brief time. Her fingers trembled as she snapped the crotch of the lingerie closed, then Natalie sat up quickly. She arranged Nick's dressing gown around herself and walked to the sink, watching herself in the mirror as she tied it securely at the waist.

She smiled, seeing a waif wearing oversized clothing, a pretender with wide eyes. A shiver ran through her and she clutched the edge of the sink, still staring at her reflection. There was no time for this, no time for thinking. She had to act, for Nick's sake . . . and for her own.

Natalie straightened in front of the mirror, pretended confidence and self-assurance and saw it reflected there. She knew what she had to do, how she had to act. LaCroix had made his mistake, now he'd pay for it. All she had to do was be brave, comfort Nick's pain, endure her own until it was over . . . and then, in this venue at least, Nick would finally win against his master.

Her grip on the doorknob was firm—she undid the lock and opened the door, moving out into the hallway as if she owned the place . . . which she did, in a sense. The bedroom door was still open, LaCroix waiting in the same position, as if he'd never moved. But a quick glance at Nick told her that he'd removed the gag, at least.

"I keep my word," LaCroix said softly. He raised his hand, brushing her hair back from her shoulder.

It took all of her effort not to flinch at his touch, not to move like startled deer. She simply watched him with wide eyes and he watched her in return, his gaze measuring her, hardening the longer he looked at her. Natalie found some small triumph in the fact that LaCroix looked away first.

He reached down beside the door and indicated a chair that he'd drawn over from the far side of the room. "I hope you don't mind—I've made myself comfortable."

Anger welled up in her as she watched him seat himself, one leg crossing over the other casually, his hands clasped together and resting on his knees. He gestured one hand toward her dismissively, saying, "You can begin any time you like."

But she hesitated, still staring at those gray, depthless eyes. "Not a word. Not a sound. You won't interfere."

They weren't questions—they were demands. LaCroix merely clasped his fingers together, a ring on one of his hands catching her eye . . . she remembered the coldness of the metal rubbing against her neck when he'd tried to mesmerize her with his voice, seduce her with sound even as he'd weakened her will with drugged champagne.

He smiled suddenly, as if reading her thoughts. "I *do* keep my word. When it suits me."

It was the best she could hope for. Turning her back on him, she walked to the bed. The first skirmish had been won. Now there was Nick to deal with, Nick to soothe and convince that there was no other way out of this than to do as LaCroix had asked.

Nick's eyes were closed as she approached the bed. A glance at the nightstand revealed the rubber ball gag that had been removed from his mouth—she swept it to the floor angrily as she passed.

But even that sound failed to rouse him. Her heart nearly broke as she saw the trails of blood on his cheeks, the red tears still wet and welling at the corners of his eyes. Natalie settled her weight on the bed carefully so as not to jostle the restraints and cause him further pain. She leaned forward and placed her hand against his cheek—his skin was so cold . . . .

"Nat—" His voice was low, so quiet that she had to lean forward to hear him—his eyes were still closed. "Go. Get out. He'll—" Nick swallowed, his head moving slightly and she saw the points on the inside of the collar dig a new wound into his neck. "He'll let you go. He's promised."

"I'm not leaving you here." When Nick opened his mouth again to protest, she leaned forward to touch her lips to his, catching the breath of his words with her kiss. It was a chaste kiss, careful and loving. "Open your eyes. Look at me."

"I can't—"

"Look at me."

He'd responded to the note of demand in her voice. His lids opened slowly, eyelashes fluttering. The irises were gold, deep gold, but tinged with red. She took the shallowest of breaths, processing that information.

"You can't stay," he whispered, voice hoarse and strained. "I'll kill you."

"You won't kill me—"

"But I'll hurt you." His eyes closed and he swallowed, hard, then he opened them again, staring up into her own. "I can't bear that."

"We'll hurt each other. That can't be helped." Tentatively, Natalie reached out her hand and stroked his arm—the muscles were extended to their length and held in that position by the chain and cuff, as were his other arm and his legs. There was no way to relax him. No matter where she touched him, the muscle would tense, trying to stretch beyond his limits. At the very least, he'd dislocate something and at the worst he'd tear a tendon and suffer excruciating pain.

"Go," he repeated, his voice weaker. "Go, now, before—"

She silenced him with another kiss, her hands cupping his face and holding his head still, to keep the collar from tearing into his skin. Raising her head, she looked to the nightstand hopefully—but there was no bottle of blood there. If there ever had been, LaCroix had removed it. The blood would have made it easier for Nick, would have taken the edge off his hunger.

She knew he wouldn't hurt her—not that way.

Her fingers caressed his face and she examined the collar between kisses. The spikes were sharp and on either side of his neck, so if he turned his head to the right or left they'd dig further into his flesh. Some of the marks had healed, were healing . . . but the fact that others were fresh and still weeping blood gave her some idea of how weak he was, how desperately he needed to feed.

They could get through this. She had to believe that . . . for both of them.

"Look at me," she'd whispered softly, when his eyes had closed again. When he obeyed, she smiled at him and stroked her hand through his hair. "It's just you and me. Forget everything else."

"But—?"

"Just you and me," she'd repeated. She rose slightly, her hand sliding down to undo the belt of the dressing gown, which she parted enough for him to see the lingerie she wore beneath. "Look—I brought you something."

Nick's eyes widened at the sight of the merry widow she wore, the barest smile falling into place. "Nice . . . ."

She pretended to pout and sat up a little straighter, letting the cut of the lingerie and gravity work for her. "That's all? Just . . . 'nice'?"

"*Very* nice," he amended, after a brief pause. And then his eyes darkened and his smile faded. "I don't want *him* to see you."

"He won't," she promised. "I'll keep the bathrobe on—he won't be able to see anything but my back from where he's sitting." Natalie leaned down beside him, taking care not to put too much pressure on his straining shoulder and arm. Her lips were even with his forehead and she kissed him lightly, nuzzling his hairline.

She was surprised when she felt the cold pressure of his lips against the skin of her upper breasts and quickly dropped a hand to his face, straightening

his head again to keep the barbs from digging into his flesh. "Don't turn your head."

"Then you'll have to . . . come closer."

There was a brightness in his eyes—the red had vanished and she saw more blue than gold, causing her to sigh in relief. The flesh of her breasts moved against his face as she breathed and his lips and teeth teased at her through the lingerie. She took advantage of the nature of the clothing and reached down one hand to adjust it, the upper section folding down to reveal more of the skin of her breasts and her nipples.

She returned her hands to his hair, kneading his scalp, running the curls through her fingers. She rested her face against his head and closed her eyes, enjoying the softness and the smell—it was still damp, which meant that he'd probably been taking a shower, preparing for their date, when LaCroix had arrived.

The thought of LaCroix was driven out of her mind almost instantly by a sudden wetness around her right nipple, Nick's mouth having wandered. She moaned and pressed closer to him as he sucked, then bit lightly with his teeth, the soft nub growing hard and firm in his mouth.

Natalie tried not to move, knowing that each time his head shifted from side to side, those awful barbs would tear more wounds into his neck. It was nearly impossible to remain still as he nibbled and sucked, abandoning one nipple with a final lick, turning his attention to the other, then returning to the first again.

Her fingers tightened in his hair and, remembering what had happened that first time when she'd actually pulled more than a few strands out by the roots, she tried to force her fingers to relax. But Nick had settled his attention to the hollow between her breasts, his lips and tongue caressing the soft skin there, then exploring the flesh to either side. Natalie felt something give way within her and she smiled as warmth flooded through her, feeling a wetness between her thighs that threatened to escape the snapped closure of her lingerie. For a moment she could pretend that it *was* just them enjoying themselves, that everything was fine.

Until she felt a sharp pain, like a pinprick, in the flesh beside one nipple. Nick's head dropped back to the pillow and she heard him take a long, shuddering breath. Pulling back from him slightly, she saw the small spot of blood on the skin of her breast—not enough to be a trickle, but a welling of red from a tiny puncture.

Nick's face was ashen, his eyes closed tightly and his features twisted in misery. "I'm sorry, Nat—I'm sorry."

She quickly tucked her breasts back within the confines of the lingerie, not knowing whether her nipples were still hard from the cold, from arousal . . . or from fear. She leaned close to him, kissed his lips and held his head tightly between her hands as he tried to turn his head away. "Sssssh!" she soothed, stroking his cheek with her fingers. "It's all right. I'm fine. It's all right."

It took a few more soft words, more reassurance and endearments before he opened his eyes, all blue and quite sad as he stared up at her. She knew then that he'd shaken his faith in himself, his belief that he could ignore himself and give her pleasure without endangering her. Natalie smiled at him, but inwardly railed at LaCroix. If his machinations had jeopardized furture explorations similar to what Nick had done to her in the shower, she was going to make him pay in spades.

For now, though, it was important to soothe Nick, to make him understand that she wasn't hurt. She kissed his nose, then his eyelids, then his lips again, eliciting a slight smile from him that warmed her heart. "I'm sorry," he said with a little less despair, although the apology was still genuine. "I . . . got carried away."

"Believe me, I didn't mind." His smile widened to a grin as she bent down to kiss him, letting her tongue quest a little deeper, knowing that it was time to step up the pace of his seduction—she didn't want to waste what she'd managed to achieve so far. Pulling back from him, she leaned an elbow on his chest and traced a line from his forehead and down his nose with one finger. "Although if I ever plan on getting my nipples pierced, I know where to go."

"Just let me check my calendar first."

She continued the line down his chin and neck, then to his chest. Her finger grazed one of his nipples and she felt a shiver pass through him . . . then saw the tightening of his jaw at the pain caused by the restraints. It scared her—that look of endurance. But it *did* have to be endured.

Her finger touched his nipple again, just grazing the tip, and she looked at him thoughtfully. Her look must have intrigued him—there was no sign of pain as the second shiver passed through him, just a puzzlement as he stared at her suspiciously. "Nat—what are you thinking?"

"Just—" She lowered her head, as if to kiss him, but paused, an inch from his lips. "Let's see how *you* like it," she'd whispered.

His eyes had widened. "Nat—no—"

But it was too late. She'd moved quickly to the nipple she'd already sensitized with those few strokes of her fingers and sealed her mouth around it. Then she bit at him, a short, sharp pressure—not enough to break the skin, but to certainly let him know she'd been there. It was the only way he'd get

past inadvertently hurting her, letting the vampire free for such a tiny slip. Nick wanted to be punished for his transgressions, both real and imagined. He understood and accepted it.

What scared her was the thought the Nick might even *enjoy* it.

This, however, he *was* meant to enjoy, meeting her playful nip with an outraged, "Ow! Don't—"

She paused at his words, raising herself enough so that she could meet his eyes. "Yes?"

"Stop . . . ," he'd finished weakly.

His eyes were wide and however terrified his expression, she saw the smile behind it—he could handle this kind of play. It was much like their verbal sparring in the past—no real harm was meant and both of them knew it. She waited for a second, then said sharply, "Which one—'don't' or 'don't stop'?"

"Don't—" he began.

But she quickly moved to the other nipple and bit down on that one as well, which resulted in another "Ow!"

"Well," she answered saucily, raising herself to her knees beside his chest, then brushing back her hair with one hand, "you didn't say . . . ." Her fingers danced lightly over and around the sensitive flesh and he moaned in response, but she recognized the sound as something pleasurable rather than painful.

While she played, she gave the strap around his chest a cursory examination and decided that LaCroix actually might have done them a good turn, there. It wasn't barbed, caused Nick no real pain other than a slight constriction of the chest, and kept movement to a minimum . . . which took some of the strain off the stretched muscles. The problem would come when she actually mounted him—the restraint was low enough against his stomach that he wouldn't be able to get enough leverage to move his hips and that bar between his thighs effectively cut off any help from that area. She'd have to do all of the work herself. It would not be an effort of endurance on her part, as she'd first thought, but self-torture.

The bastard.

She forced her smile to remain in place, hearing Nick's audible reaction to the work of her fingers as she pinched and twisted, pushed and prodded, stroked with a light touch or drew her fingernails across the flesh covering the muscles of his chest, returning occasionally to his nipples just in case they'd forgotten that she was still there.

There was something in the soft sounds he made that alerted her to the fact that something was wrong—the way he bit back on them, trying to muffle the noise. Natalie stopped, resting her hands lightly against his chest, holding him still as his body shuddered and strained. His eyes closed and a faint grouping of pink moisture gathered on his brow.

A glance to her right gave her all the answer she needed.

It was the cock cage. His shaft had risen and grown in response to her caresses, the straps biting cruelly into his flesh as it became engorged with blood. He was trapped somewhere between the pleasure and the pain, fighting to keep her from knowing how much he was hurting.

A lump rose in her throat and she fought the urge to turn and scream abuse at LaCroix, then let her hands fall to her sides, the fingers clenching into tight fists instead. It took just a few seconds to regain her own control once she remembered that she had to think about Nick, she had to help him.

As before, she leaned on his upper chest gently, catching his face between her palms to hold his head still—he shook his head, trying to escape the agony, and only succeeded in shredding the flesh along his neck. She knew the smell of fresh blood must be tormenting Nick—another thing she could lay at LaCroix's feet. He'd planned this well. If he'd made a mistake in underestimating what she was willing to do on Nick's behalf, this was his consolation prize.

She dared a quick glance at LaCroix over her shoulder, unable to keep the hatred from her eyes. He met her gaze evenly, raised his hand, as if giving her his permission to continue, a slight smile on his lips. Natalie turned back to Nick quickly, distracted for a moment . . . because just before LaCroix's features had fallen into that superior, detached mask, she'd seen another expression on his face. She must have imagined the look of sadness as he'd stared past her and at Nick, the strain in his clenched jaw, the sympathy in his eyes, his fingers clasped together so tightly that the flesh at his knuckles was the color of bone. Just as she must have imagined that brief flash of absolute hatred that had shone in his eyes in the first second that their gazes had locked.

Her mind slipped back to what he'd said and done so far, his tone of voice with her being cool or casual or flippant, except for a comment here or there when she'd acknowledged the truth in what he'd said with a look, if not with words. It occurred to her that he really *was* trying to help Nick. He thought he was doing right by forcing Nick away from his dreams of mortality, making him accept the nature of the vampire and all that it entailed.

She closed her eyes, tears of anger and sorrow forming, which she quickly brushed away. How could LaCroix have gotten it all so horribly wrong? He *did* care for Nick—she was sure of it. He was taking no pleasure from this, no joy from Nick's pain . . . although she wouldn't dare to guess the same about her own.

She was the enemy, she was the one who had given Nick hope these past

few years, given Nick's quest form and substance and a possibility of success that had nothing to do with the vagaries of magic or faith, but the solid foundation of science. Perhaps there was some small element in this meant to punish Nick, but the lesson in this exercise was directed at her. LaCroix had been willing to subject Nick to this pain knowing he'd survive it, in the hope that he'd scare her off or hurt her so badly that she'd give up on Nick and push him away.

LaCroix wanted to hurt her. He wanted *Nick* to hurt her and in such a way that their future intimacy would be endangered. Whatever else LaCroix didn't understand, he knew that Nick was a creature of guilt, that he held onto that self-hatred with a lover's embrace and cherished it within his heart until the poison of it couldn't help but destroy him.

She'd assumed that LaCroix had made a mistake—she'd been wrong. There was a chance that her refusal to abandon Nick might draw Nick closer to her . . . but it was just as likely that the guilt he'd harbor would push her away. Nick would be afraid to touch her, to speak with her, to even be near her, blaming himself for what had happened and wallowing so deeply in his guilt that he'd never notice that what she needed was not his absence or protection, but his love and understanding.

Natalie opened her eyes and swallowed, fighting back the tears as she stared at Nick's face, which was haggard with the strain of maintaining his control and enduring the pain. She was wrong, too, in that there was only this to be endured and no more. When this was over, she'd have to fight for him all over again, but this time Nick would be her antagonist. All the ground they'd gained would be lost, trampled underfoot by his guilt. It was wearying, demoralizing. She couldn't bear it. She couldn't keep fighting . . . .

"Nat?"

His eyes had opened—gold, tinged with red. She brushed away her tears quickly and forced a smile, placed the warmth of her fingers against the cool flesh of his face, tried to wipe away the lines of worry that had suddenly been added to his other burdens. She leaned forward to kiss him, knowing that she couldn't give up now, couldn't walk away. He was worth it—he had to be. If she lost, if *they* lost, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Besides, she wouldn't give LaCroix the satisfaction of giving up, especially now. She'd take him on in round two, and round three, and round twenty-three if she had to.

Her fingers traced the line of Nick's jaw and she felt the change in him, knew that his fangs were in place, but never showed the fear that swept through her at the thought—she didn't dare let him know that she was afraid.

She didn't dare let herself know how truly afraid she was.

Contenting herself with soft, tender kisses was her solution. She dabbed at his forehead with the sleeve of the dressing gown, wishing now that it was the terricloth bathrobe she'd talked him into getting for himself—far more absorbent and easy to bleach. The thought made her smile more genuine and she found it easier to soothe him; practical to the last, that was Natalie Lambert.

Except in the case of one very weary, very lonely, very heartsick vampire.

"Don't hold it in," she whispered. "Scream, if you need to. Let it out. Save your strength. It won't bother me."

His chest rose with a long, ragged breath and he closed his eyes momentarily. "I won't—give him the satisfaction," he growled.

She ran her hand through his hair, her fingers down his face, and leaned close again, knowing that he'd never understand just how much his cries of pain would hurt LaCroix. "Then do it for me. Help *me*."

His eyes opened at that, the red gone and the gold giving way to a worried and dominant blue. "How?"

"I can't touch you. Anything I do is going to cause you pain." Natalie let her frustration enter her voice, some of her despair coloring her tone so he understood her problem. "If you hold onto it, if you don't let it go—Nick, it's like a feedback loop. It will only increase the tension. Screaming's a release. It won't do a lot to alleviate the pain, but it'll do *something*. And it might prevent serious damage."

"I'll heal," he said grimly, gritting his teeth again and closing his eyes.

She placed her hand on his shoulder, her heart arching as she felt the muscle strain when he involuntarily pulled on the restraints. "But I *won't*." His eyes had opened instantly at her admission and she raised her hand to her breast, just at her heart. "Not *here*."

She was using his guilt against him and hated herself for doing it—but it would bring him some relief. Nick continued to meet her eyes, a faint smile on his lips, then the smile twisted and he closed his eyes again.

"Let it go," she whispered, placing her head on his chest, holding him tightly in as much of an embrace as she dared without putting an additional strain on him. "Let it go, for me."

His chest rose with the breath he took, his eyes squeezing shut. The sound he released wasn't so much of a scream as a yell. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and however much she wanted to run away and hide, hands over her ears, she held onto him. But she'd been right—she felt the muscles in his chest relax slightly beneath the warmth of her fingers. It *had* helped.

It took her an instant to identify the sound that had been concurrent with Nick's yell or perhaps a second after—a chair thrown hastily aside, the wooden

legs scraping across the floor. She was aware that LaCroix was standing behind her and smiled to herself—Nick had scored a point without even knowing it.

Natalie turned her head to look at LaCroix over her shoulder. The eyes that gazed at Nick's form in worry met her own in cold hatred. They simply stared at one another and he took a step toward her, one hand raised as if his instinct was to tear her away from Nick.

Then the hand had fallen back to his side and LaCroix appeared composed, unshaken. "Finish it," he commanded, then turned and walked back to his chair.

However much she hated him, she knew LaCroix was right—there was no reason to prolong Nick's pain . . . or put off her own. Ignoring the scrape of the chair as he righted it, she reached up to stroke her fingers along Nick's face. "Better?"

"Yeah," he admitted, with a long sigh.

"Keep doing that." She patted his chest with the flat of her hand almost proprietarily, then slipped off the bed, letting her hand trail down his ribcage and stomach, then rest on his hips as she walked, so he wouldn't think she'd left him.

There wasn't much to it, from what she could see—she was right in that the bar positioned between his thighs would keep him from aiding her in any way. She reached down and unsnapped the crotch of her lingerie, then climbed over Nick's right leg and onto the bed.

The cock cage made him seem enormous. She knew it was only her mind playing tricks on her, but it still gave her pause. On her hands and knees, she made her way up to him, balancing so that she wouldn't jar the metal bar that held his legs apart.

The strap around his scrotum was elastic and although she was tempted to remove it immediately, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to mount Nick before he ejaculated—LaCroix had been very specific about what he'd wanted demonstrated and she had no intention of putting either one of them through *this* again.

Natalie reached out her hand and folded her fingers lightly around his captive shaft, which led Nick to respond with a loud, uninhibited groan. "Good boy," she'd said softly, her other hand stroking his thigh.

Inwardly, she wanted to cry. The straps on the device *were* barbed on the inside—trickles of blood ran down his shaft in the spots where the points had pierced his flesh. LaCroix had shown no mercy when he'd initially fixed the straps and now Nick's cock strained against them, held cruelly in place. Although blood could and did enter the shaft as he was aroused, the backflow was constricted, which meant that his erection would last longer than it should, causing him even more pain.

He was hard. He was ready. But . . . was she?

Not daring to delay any longer, Natalie took a deep breath. She raised herself over Nick's shaft, his dressing gown billowing around her like a curtain, shielding her from LaCroix's view. She lowered herself carefully, her hand guiding him into her.

His shaft pulsed in her hand and she felt the stickiness of the blood from his torn flesh on her fingers, but that was all she felt from him. His legs were immobilized, as was his chest—he couldn't rise up to meet her. But another groan that became a yell erupted from his mouth, instingated by her touch alone.

She froze, the sound stopping her. Then she closed her eyes, spread her legs a little wider, and tried to push him inside her in one, quick thrust.

It didn't work. The cock cage was tapered at the top to compress the flesh at the tip of his shaft. The head of his penis was enlarged and—she guessed from another near-scream—extremely sensitive. She bit her lip, pressing down slowly and moving her hips back and forth, trying to maneuver him inside her. Finally, she succeeded, but relying on her weight and gravity to do the rest simply wasn't an option; the leather straps not only caused his flesh to bulge between them, but also created ridged rings. Tears filled her eyes as she forced herself down over him an inch at a time, feeling the edges of the straps scraping the flesh from her insides.

Even the mucus she'd managed to build up earlier for lubrication wasn't helping. The leather was hard and dry, unyielding as it entered her. She stopped, panting, and rested on her knees with no more then two inches of him inside her, hoping her internal warmth and lubrication would soften the straps. But then she felt Nick's shaft twitch beneath her and he let out such a scream . . . .

She had to hurry. She had to do this quickly.

Another hard push downward and she grabbed the sheets of the bed in her fingers, letting out a cry of pain. A warmth from inside and a stinging sensation told her that she was bleeding—nothing ruptured, just a deep abrasion. Another push and she slid farther, the muscled walls inside her being stretched and scratched. Somehow, she knew that Nick was yelling each time she pushed, but she was past hearing. She was concentrating on her goal, on getting him inside her, focusing all of her thoughts and energies on that, trying to ignore the raw and brutal pain that warned her to stop.

The base of the device, the thickest part, was the worst. She'd dreaded it from the moment his shaft had entered her and knew she couldn't manage it

with anything less than brutal force. Gritting her teeth, she slammed her body down on top of him.

The scream started at the very depths of her lungs and tore its way up through her chest. Her fists flailed against the flesh of Nick's thighs, her fingernails gouging furrows in his skin. Still clutching the sheets, she pulled them upward, knowing that she was shifting Nick, that she was increasing the pull on his restraints, but not being able to control herself.

It was the melding of the two that so unbalanced her, the raw torment of the pain . . . and the pleasurable fire inside her that fed from it. She forced herself to remain still, leaned her hands on the bed and breathed deeply. The pain lessened if she froze in place, didn't move.

Closing her eyes, Natalie felt her lingerie sticking to her skin; Nick's satin dressing gown was plastered to her body by her sweat. She felt him inside her, felt filled by him, felt . . . satisfied, in a way that frightened her. But the longer she remained where she was, unmoving, the louder Nick's groans sounded to her ears. She felt his body tremble beneath her, knowing that he ached for release and that simply pulling the strap off his scrotum wouldn't do it, not with the cage preventing the backflow of blood and sustaining his erection. She understood that now.

Just as she understood that her body wouldn't let her stay still. The fire burned, aching within her, because she *had* to move. She'd only find release when she satisfied the physics of the thing, friction and pressure, the slap of flesh upon flesh until the nerves gave way and the senses overloaded.

So she closed her eyes and she moved upward, slowly. This was no attempt to maintain sexual tension—God, she wanted this to be *over*—but to find something that *didn't* hurt. Even the slow movement brought tears to her eyes and the pain caused her body to shudder, the cage scraping against her insides on the way out just as it had on the way in.

Nick's moans and cries were almost continuous and however much the cage tore at her insides, the sound of his pain tore at her heart. It gave her the strength to move a little more, to force her muscles to pull herself up, no matter how agonizing it became. At the apex again, with just the tip of him inside her, she felt a brief moment of relief. It was the movement that hurt her—the stillness was only a dull ache, a stinging sensation compared to the brutality motion inflicted upon her.

And she had to do it again and again until Nick found release . . . or she'd never be free of the bargain she'd made with LaCroix.

The drop onto him was swift and this time she was prepared for the pain, gritting her teeth against the scream and suppressing most of it. Before she could find any peace in the stillness, she pulled herself up off him sharply, then forced him into her again. If she moved quickly, the agony rippled through her like waves, repeating with each stroke. There was no breath left for screaming; the pain stole it from her. It was difficult enough to fill her lungs with air, each thrust all but knocking the wind out of her. She settled into a steady rhythm—pain, followed by an instant of no pain, followed again by searing agony.

At some point she became numb to it, her body refusing to acknowledge *any* sensation, except the tingling pleasure that following each forceful stroke. Nick's shaft remained erect within her, his moans of frustration and agony growing louder. She didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to know if his own were red with blood-lust, if his fangs were extended. There was only the moment, the push and pull, the friction. It seemed like forever, went on far longer than it should have, and then she felt the stirring of his shaft within her—the first real indication that he was approaching climax. Tears continued to spill over her cheeks, but those from the pain were washed away by others of relief at her impending freedom.

She felt behind her for the strap that held Nick's scrotum from his shaft, still making her thrusts onto him, waiting for a sign. There was no way she could spare him the pain, the sudden agony of that instant, which would dwarf any of the anguish he'd endured so far. Her only consolation was that it would be over, then.

It would be over.

Nick groaned, almost yelling in his agony. She felt his shaft within her, still strong and hard, and knew that if she released him now, it would not be too much longer. Her fingers fumbled at the straps, the numbness having extended to even her extremities, but she found the right one. With a snap she pulled it up and released it, freeing him.

His body tensed beneath her, froze for a second that extended to eternity, and then he screamed.

Natalie shuddered at the sound of his cry, prolonged anguish and pain beyond belief, her hands raised to her ears to block out the sound and her eyes still closed. Then her own body began to shudder again as she felt his shaft begin to pump within her, felt it jerk and throb as if it had a will of its own, scraping her raw, tearing at her. Her own scream was high and piercing, blending and surpassing the last remnants of his own, until she had screamed all that she could—there was no more sound to her.

And still his shaft throbbed and pumped within her, the cage having pushed him beyond physical limits. Nick emptied all that he had into her, but the shaft refused to soften, engorged with blood. She began to shiver as a wave of cold raced through her. Her teeth chattered as she shook

uncontrollably, her body responding to the end of this marathon. Natalie tried to grab hold of the sheets, but lost them, folding her hands across her breasts for warmth, for comfort, wanting to die . . . .

There were hands on her shoulders, a grip of steel. She felt him behind her—LaCroix!—one hand baring her neck, then pushing her head to one side. Too numb to move or react, she felt the scrape of his fangs across her skin, the sensation almost pleasurable after what she'd been through.

She thought she was dead. She knew she was dead. It didn't matter.

There was no puncture, no bite. His breath whispered past her ear, "Remember—"

And then a scream from Nick, a shout of "No!" that echoed through the room. She opened her eyes and saw the angry crimson of his eyes, his fangs bared. He sat up, the chain snapping from the collar, as he snarled and growled, shouting "LaCroix!" Then the chain attached to the right wrist cuff snapped and he stared down at it, bewildered at his sudden freedom.

LaCroix was gone—Natalie never quite knew exactly when he'd left. She only dimly realized that Nick was tearing at the other wrist cuff, barely pausing to unfasten the bolt. He snapped the chest restraint and brushed her from him. She fell to the side with an agonized moan as his shaft, only now beginning to soften, was pulled from her body, along with the leather cock cage.

Natalie was numb and cold, her nerve-endings burnt and frazzled. She wasn't certain whether her eyes were closed or open, couldn't move, didn't want to. Only dimly did she make note of the slam of the metal bar against the wall, the rattling of chains. She expected to hear the slam of a door as Nick left, following LaCroix.

But then there were soft and gentle hands on her, caressing hands. She blinked as Nick's weight rested on the bed beside her and the world shifted as he lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. There were tracks of dried blood tears on his face and fresher ones than that as he gazed down into her eyes.

His eyes were blue, like the sky. She loved the color of his eyes.

He was crying.

She lifted her hand to touch his face and was astonished to find that her muscles responded to her will. Groggily, she looked around, shifting in his arms, even as Nick made soft and soothing sounds to quiet her. His voice sounded odd, strained, as if he'd strained it shouting or screaming.

He'd been screaming . . . .

She touched one of the hands that held her tightly, surprised to find the cuff still attached to his wrist. Her fingers went to work on the bolt and she concentrated on it, turning it, wondering how she could have made the error—why hadn't she taken this off him? She always unfastened the restraints. It was sloppy. Very sloppy.

"Nat, it's all right," his voice had whispered softly in her ear, his lips pressing into her hair. "Leave it. It's all right."

"It's not all . . . right." She hesitated, her own voice sounding odd—breaking. Natalie met his gaze. "You've cut yourself. I think—there are bandages. I left some bandages here—"

Before he could realize what she was doing, she pulled herself from his embrace and stumbled off the bed, nearly falling. She stared down at the floor, at her bare feet, which seemed unable to hold her properly. Her legs ached, but she couldn't really feel anything.

The bathroom. The bandages were in the bathroom.

She heard him trying to pursue her, the clank as a chain got caught, then he slipped on the sheets. It didn't mean anything, even when he called her name. Natalie walked almost blindly in the darkness, knowing where she was going as she felt her way along the wall, leaning on it heavily. She pulled herself along until she reached the bathroom door.

It was open. Her palm grazed the wall, connecting with the light switch, and she stumbled to the sink as if sleep walking. Opening the cabinet, she took the roll of white cotton from the shelf.

Bandages. For Nick. His hand was bleeding.

She turned, the free end wrapped around her fingers, and the bandages rolled from her hand and to the floor. It wandered away, over the door sill and into the hall . . . past Nick. He was standing in the doorway, leaning on the door frame. His hand was bleeding and when he moved it, it left a crimson mark on the wall.

"You're still bleeding," she said, offering him the edge of the bandage roll. But when she looked down, she noticed another trail of blood dotting the tile. "More blood."

"Nat?"

She looked up at him as he moved toward her, then felt her legs begin to give way. Murmuring, "*My* blood," with some surprise, she fell into his arms.

Natalie closed her eyes, dizzied by the blur of motion as he swept her up, one hand beneath her knees and the other around her shoulders. His hand stroked her hair and she snuggled against his shoulder, but still felt cold. So cold . . . .

Her eyes shot open as he carried her into the bedroom and she tensed, grabbing hold of his neck tightly and burying her face against his shoulder. "Not here. Downstairs. Not here. Not here—"

Her stomach twisted, like she'd gone down a rollercoaster in an amusement park, and then he was placing her on the couch. She stared up at the ceiling, aware that he was pushing a pillow beneath her head. A blanket settled over her body and her arms. Her hands felt heavy and she couldn't move them at first, however much she wanted to.

He was suddenly beside her, kneeling on the floor next to the couch, his face buried in her hair. She finally managed to move her hand out from beneath the blanket and touched his shoulder. Nick lifted his head, his eyes wide and almost panicked—she saw gold too close to the surface. His face was still streaked with blood.

"Shock." She managed to smile, having formed the word successfully, her hand rising to his face—he grasped it and held her hand tightly to his cheek. "I'm in . . . shock."

"You need a doctor."

She blinked at him.

She loved his eyes. And his smile. She wanted him to smile.

"Nat?"

Shaking her head, she opened her eyes—when had they closed? Then she blinked again, realizing that he wasn't wearing any clothing. "You're . . . naked. Where's your robe? You'll catch cold." As she shifted her head, she caught the scent of his aftershave and the damp and sweat-stained silk rubbed against her cheek. "*I've* got your robe. Here—"

She tried to rise, to sit up, but he pressed a hand firmly, if gently, against her shoulder, pushing her back. "I'm taking you to a hospital."

Natalie blinked at him. "No clothes—"

"I'll get dressed. Stay here. All right?" His worried eyes looked down into her own, then he leaned forward to place a kiss on her forehead, his hand squeezing her shoulder lightly before he left her.

She stared up at the ceiling and wondered why her thoughts were so fuzzy. She couldn't *feel* anything. Numb—that was the word. She was numb, inside and out. Her body felt heavy and she was still cold. And Nick—

Nick was getting dressed. She had to get dressed. They were going dancing. They were—

Still clutching the blanket to her, she pushed herself to a sitting position, then leaned her forehead against the leather covered padding of the couch as the world spun around her. Natalie closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them, the world was steady again. She would go upstairs and get her dress. Her dress was . . . her dress was in the bathroom. She would get her dress from the bathroom.

But Nick might be in the shower. If he locked the door, she couldn't get in to get her dress . . . it was in the bathroom. He liked to take hot showers. Would the steam hurt the dress? She wasn't sure. It might help to smooth out the wrinkles. She didn't remember hanging it up. It might be on the floor and he might step on it when he got into the shower, because it was in the bath—

A shudder ran through her body, startling her. Natalie blinked as reality and clarity came crashing in. Shock. She'd been in shock. Mild, certainly. Induced by trauma. Trauma, hell! Induced by *torture* . . . .

Her fingers clutched the leather couch desperately and she looked around for Nick, then remembered that he was upstairs. He was getting dressed—he wanted to take her to the hospital.

She tried to move from the couch, but her legs were numb and unresponsive. Taking a deep breath, she looked back over her shoulder, toward the stairs and the second floor. He must be in pain; even with his constitution, he couldn't have healed *that* quickly. Blood. He needed blood. Just as she needed . . . what?

She was thirsty. She needed a drink. And she'd better take a couple of aspirin, because when she finally emerged from the shock, when this blessed grace period of post-trauma numbness lifted, she was going to be hurting.

The word stuck in her mind—hurt. It became the center of her universe as the first sharp spear of agony pierced her the post-traumatic veil that had left her so deliciously numb. Trauma did that sometimes; the body's senses become so overloaded that they simply shut down, turn themselves off to give the system time to recalibrate, to make sense of what was wrong, to pinpoint injuries and stress and wounds. That's all pain was—a warning that something was wrong.

Something *was* wrong. There was the word and then the pain, intense enough to drive the air from her lungs like a blow to the stomach. Eyes wide, she lost her grip on the back of the couch and dropped against the pillow, knocking it to the floor. Instinctively, she breathed, pulling in every bit of oxygen she could in one long, tremulous breath—

Which she released in a scream.

Feeling had returned. Her legs were no longer numb, her hands didn't weigh a hundred pounds, her mind was clear. And every scrape she'd received from the rough edges of the leather, every gouge made by a cold, metal buckle, ever tear caused by her inability to stretch herself enough to hold both Nick and that brutal device inside her . . . it all came crashing in at once.

She was shaking uncontrollably, her hands drawn up to her chest. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but the flashes of pain that ran through her struck with such force she couldn't close her eyes. Natalie stared, making small and

helpless noises she'd never heard from herself before—whimpers and half-breaths and wordless cries.

Nick was there. His expression was fearsome, angry—and then, when he'd realized that she was alone, he'd tried to pick her up in his arms.

She screamed again, the sudden movement shifting something that didn't want to be moved. He almost dropped her, but caught her before she fell and carefully lowered her to the couch, sitting beside her. "Nat?"

She couldn't stop shaking, couldn't stop crying, even as his arms encircled her. He felt warm against her and she clung to him, fingers clutching his yet-unbuttoned shirt-front. There was no comfortable position, no way she could sit or move or not move to escape the pain.

"It hurts!" she wailed, hating herself for admitting it, but being unable to form any other words. "It hurts!"

When she closed her mouth, her teeth chattered. Her eyes were burning, her tears still flowing unabated. She drew her knees up to her chest—*bad* idea. She turned her head against Nick's shoulder, muffling her shriek of pain in his shirt. She wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and hide until the pain went away, until the shaking stopped, until there weren't any more tears . . . until she died.

Nick's hands moved around her and she felt him enclose her in the blanket—like swaddling a baby. Some part of her brain not occupied with the pain remembered that he'd been a doctor, once upon a time. He was trying to stop her shaking, trying to prevent her from going into convulsions.

It hurt *so* much!

She tried not to scream when he lifted her in his arms, but this time he was ready for it, clutching her tightly despite the ferocity of the sound. Every step sent another wave of agony through her, like knives cutting through her flesh, flaying her from the inside out. Then the world blurred past and they were at the elevator. She shoved one fist in her mouth and bit down on it, trying not to scream, to drown out her constant moans and whimpers.

She heard the elevator door slammed aside. Nick stepped forward—then stopped, jostling her against him. Natalie pressed her face into his shoulder, his flesh taking the brunt of her scream.

"Upstairs," said a woman's voice, in such an authoritative fashion that even *she* would have thought twice about disobeying the command.

For a second, surprise sent away the pain. Natalie turned her head just enough to see the figure in the elevator—a woman in her mid-forties with dark skin, her head covered with tight ebony curls. She was wearing a trenchcoat and beneath that Natalie caught of glimpse of what might have been a white labcoat or smock, the bag in her hand looking very familiar, very medical.

The pain came back in a wave as Nick adjusted his hold on her and she turned her face into his chest again. He pressed his cheek against the top of her head in mute apology as she groaned. But when he spoke, his voice was cold and final. "Get out of my way."

"Don't be an ass-hole. I'm here to help," said the woman's voice.

Natalie felt the back of a cool hand at her cheek and flinched. The woman's shadow fell over her. Fingers touched her neck and she recognized their intent immediately—the woman was taking her pulse.

"She's out of the first stages of shock," said that very clinical voice. "Take her upstairs. I can give her something for the pain, then I'll check her out."

Natalie felt the defiance rumbling in Nick's chest, but didn't dare to look up, didn't dare to move. Even breathing was agony. . . .

"She needs a doctor."

"*I'm* a doctor," said the woman. "What did you miss, the bag or the lab coat?"

The voice moved away and Natalie saw a flash of brown as the woman peeled off her trenchcoat, throwing it over the piano.

"I'm taking her to the hospital—"

"And you'll tell them . . . what? That she fell down a flight of stairs?" There was nothing but cold disdain in her voice.

Nick's voice had been equally defiant, but it cracked as he answered, "You don't *know*—"

"I *know*," said the woman, "that they're going to take one look at her and call the cops—which I've been told would be a problem for you. Then they're going to call rape crisis, which isn't going to be pretty for either of you." The woman's voice softened as she added, "For God's sake, man, take her upstairs and let me *help* her. She's in *pain*."

"He sent you, didn't he?" Nick accused. "He sent you—"

Natalie raised her hand to the side of his neck to get his attention, able to perform that small action with nothing more than a twinge. Nick stared down at her and she saw fear in his eyes—fear for her.

"It's . . . all right," she whispered. "She's right. Let her—let her try . . . ."

She was still shaking, but she felt his arms tighten their grip around her. He looked like he was going to cry. She wanted to reach up and run her fingers through his blond curls, massage the taut muscles in his neck, chase away the shadow of terror that haunted those blue eyes that she loved so very much . . . .

There was no time to feel anything. She gasped as her stomach dropped

out from beneath her again and the room blurred, whizzing past. Suddenly, they were on the upper landing, Nick carrying her into the bedroom with steady, purposeful strides.

The woman was there was well, the 'doctor'—as Natalie had begun to think of her. Natalie bit her lip as Nick lowered her toward the bed, even his careful movements sending waves of pain through her, but the woman called "Stop!"

Nick froze and Natalie took a long breath as he held her above the crumpled, torn, and bloody sheets. She could see the remnants of the chains Nick had broken, the padded metal cuffs lying atop the bed. Embarrassment flooded through her, wiping out the pain for an instant, and she felt her face flush scarlet as she turned her head, hiding her eyes against him.

"Black satin?" asked the woman voice in disgust. "You boys never *do* grow up, do you?" There was the sound of material tearing—Natalie realized, through the boundaries that delineated her pain-centric world, that the woman was stripping the bed. "I trust you have clean sheets. Am I lucky enough to trust you have something a little less flashy, like cotton?"

Nick's response was still cold, still distant. "Bottom drawer of the dresser, left side."

"Oh, it's my lucky day! Have to stop off and pick up a lottery ticket on my way home."

There was the sound of the dresser drawer being opened. Natalie felt Nick's lips brush her forehead again, opened her mouth to tell him that she'd be fine, that they'd be okay . . . but all she managed was a low moan. Beyond that, she distinguished the flap of cloth being spread out.

"You're going to lose some of these sheets, son—nothing we can do about that. Lay her down here. Gently, now—"

The sheet beneath her was white, like snow, and everything else—all the remnants from LaCroix's 'demonstration'—had disappeared. Still, Natalie dug her fingers into the fabric of Nick's shirt, undershirt, and the flesh beneath as he lowered her to the bed. Even though he was gentle, the initial contact with the surface scared her. She heard herself whimper and couldn't release him, afraid to let him go.

The woman was beside Nick, bending over her, and Natalie got another good look—brown eyes and high cheekbones. She could have been a model. But there was a soft smile on her face as she carefully disengaged Natalie's fingers from his shirt. "It's okay now. No one's going to hurt you. I'm here to help you—" The woman's head turned and she glanced at Nick as he straightened, freed from her grasp. "What's her name?"

"Natalie."

"Natalie," the woman repeated. Then she bent down again and placed the back of her hand against Natalie's cheek. "You just stay still, sweetheart. I'll take care of you." Her hand rested on Natalie's shoulder and she asked Nick sharply, "The robe—yours or hers?"

"Mine."

"It's history. Buy another one." Even as Natalie tried to protest, the woman grabbed the seams of the robe's shoulder in either hand and the satin tore easily, first the left side and then the right. She drew the sleeves down Natalie's arms, tossed the torn cloths to the floor, then sent the front panels of the robe after them. The black medical bag was moved to the nightstand and opened.

Natalie stared up at the ceiling—even turning her head seemed painful—and tried to control the shivers that ran through her body. They'd lessened considerably, but she couldn't escape the cold. The agony that had ripped through her had quieted to a dull roar, now that she was still. She was afraid to move, afraid to think, afraid . . . .

Afraid that Nick would leave her. Because if he left now, she had a feeling she'd never see him again.

There was a spot of cold wetness against her arm. "Hold her steady," said the woman, and Natalie dared to turn her head, looking down to watch as Nick grasped her shoulder firmly in an attempt to hold her arm still. A familiar sound caught her attention and she watched in horrified fascination as the woman tapped a needle, then moved the plunger far enough to squirt a few drops from the tip.

Natalie let out a cry and tried to move away as the needle came toward her, but Nick held her in place. The woman looked down at her, her expression less placating than sympathetic. "This'll knock you out for a little while," said the woman, her words slow, but firm. "Maybe take some of the edge off the pain. You allergic to anything?"

"Penicillin," said Nick, his tone still formal to the point of defiance. "I think that's all."

Natalie nodded her assent, not trusting her voice as the woman looked at her, verifying his words.

"Okay," said the woman, with a slight smile. "That makes it easier. Close your eyes, Natalie." A pause. "You might want to take her hand."

The last was directed at Nick. Natalie gratefully felt his fingers wrap around her own, but ignored the command to close her eyes. She watched the needle enter her skin, wincing at the sharp sting . . . but it was such a small pain, compared with everything else she'd felt.

"Just hang in there for a second—" The plunger went down, pushing the faintly amber drug into her vein.

"Good girl." The needle was withdrawn, then the woman swabbed at the spot where it had entered her skin, covering the small wound with a circle bandage. She had a light touch Natalie found herself envying. It was so much easier working with the dead—you never had to worry about hurting them.

A slow and steady warmth flooded through her, spreading up her arm, then to her shoulder, then down her chest. Natalie looked up and saw Nick staring at her, that haunted, aching look in his eyes. She forced a smile for his benefit.

It was easier to smile. She'd stopped shaking. And with that delicious warmth came a numbness that obliterated the pain. But even through that, she felt his hand on her shoulder, his other hand still tightly gripping her own.

The woman was folding a sheet as she stepped toward the bed—the whiteness of it blinded Natalie for a moment. "Okay, you—" she tapped Nick on the shoulder, "out."

"No!" Natalie forced the word out and clenched his fist around his fingers as tightly as she could, intent on not letting go. A cold sweat broke over her—if he left now, she'd never see him again. She knew it.

The woman hesitated, looking at Nick, then back down at her. "Sweetheart, I'm gonna be doing some sensitive stuff to you. I don't think you're gonna want your boyfriend around."

"Nick's . . . Nick's a doctor." Natalie blinked as the room swam before her eyes—words were getting harder to find. But she concentrated on Nick's face, on his profile as he turned toward the woman.

"I've practiced medicine, once or twice," he admitted, when she gave him a questioning look. "I could give you a hand."

"The only hand I want you to hold is *hers*," said the woman sharply. But her expression softened as she looked down at Natalie. "Okay. You sit there, right by her head. You don't second-guess me. You don't mess with me. You just let me help her."

"Thank you," whispered Natalie. She smiled as Nick leaned down, lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. Then he released her hand.

She felt the bed shift beneath his weight as he seated himself beside her. His fingers brushed her shoulder, then began stroking her hair. It was a wonderful feeling. Natalie felt like she was floating. She tried to keep her eyes open, but it was so hard—her eyelids felt so heavy.

Nick was speaking, saying something. She tried to pay attention, a few words here and there.

"—Why LaCroix—sent you—"

"Owed him one—" The woman's answer was also distant, the words slipping away. "Called in a debt. Not my idea, but if it means I don't have to deal with the son of a bitch—"

Natalie felt herself falling into the darkness. There was a sensation of a cloth being draped across her chest—it was smooth and smelled clean. She fought to keep her eyes open, but she was so comfortable and Nick's hand stroked her hair.

"Nick—?" she asked, her words sounding slurred, even to her own ears.

She felt his breath on her cheek. "What? Nat—what's wrong?"

His voice was so soft . . . and worried. He shouldn't be worried. She felt wonderful.

She tried to move her hand and found it felt heavy again. But then she felt the weight of his fingers against her own. His skin seemed cold. Cold, like she'd felt, when she'd been in pain.

"You're . . . hurt." She licked her dry lips; she was still thirsty, but she fought to find the words, even though her eyes wouldn't stay open. There was only light between her lashes, the white of the woman's lab coat near the foot of the bed—"She can help . . . you."

His fingers tightened around her own, but she couldn't seem to open her eyes. Nor did she want to. It was so quiet, where she was. So peaceful. So calm.

So dark.

There was a feeling of comfort, of being warm and dry, if not clean.

Natalie opened her eyes and recognized the view from the last time she'd awakened in Nick's bed. At first the two occasions seemed to merge in her mind. She couldn't quite recall what time it might be, or day.

The room was dark, with only the light from the hall outside the open door to give her any clue. It was still night, apparently. Still night . . . and how far away from the dawn?

Memory returned with a thud and she closed her eyes, still not having moved anything but them. Her limbs felt heavy and weak. She had no real sense of the rest of her body, as anything but a dull, numb weight to which she was somehow distantly attached.

She was aware, though, of a weight lying across her chest, above the covers. And she opened her eyes, just to check.

Nick was lying beside her, almost curled around her, sound asleep. He was lying on top of the covers, still wearing the shirt and slacks he'd thrown on the night before when he'd been so dead set on taking her to a hospital—a

course she would have nipped in the bud if she'd been in her right mind. His head rested against her shoulder and she turned her face slightly, to let the blond curls run along her cheek. His arm was thrown across her and even though she hated the thought of having a 'protector,' the gesture was so endearing that it brought tears to her eyes.

"Are you in pain, Natalie?" asked a quiet voice.

Natalie looked up and saw the woman from the night before—the doctor. She'd shed her white coat and was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and gray slacks, but Natalie recognized her easily. "No. I'm just . . . numb."

"You'll stay that way for another hour." The woman smiled, then pulled a chair up beside the bed. She reached over and Natalie felt a slight pressure on her fingers. "Feel that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good." The woman smiled. "The name's Paula. We didn't get much of an introduction last night."

"Paula." Natalie studied the woman's face, her wide smile, and decided it fit. "About last night—thank you—"

"No thanks necessary," said Paula sharply. "I was returning a favor. Although if I'd known what I was walking into, I might have gone through a few more red lights."

Remembering the medical bag and feeling the cooled skin against her own warm hand, Natalie swallowed. "You're a . . . ?"

"Vampire?" offered Paula, raising an eyebrow.

"Doctor."

Natalie's correction was quick. Paula's smile returned. "Obstetrician. Vampire *and* obstetrician. Yes, I know," she added, when it was Natalie's turn to raise an eyebrow. "We don't have kids. Not that way. But it's my contact with the mortal world. Reminds me of what I left behind. Besides, do you *know* how many babies are born at night?"

Natalie laughed lightly in response, but then stopped herself and turned her head, to make certain that she hadn't awakened Nick.

"They look so harmless when they're asleep," noted Paula.

His eyes were still closed—she could barely see any sign of breathing. "Vampires?"

"Men."

Natalie chuckled again and Paula squeezed her hand. "Good. It's good to hear you laugh. I think you need to laugh when you can, from what I've seen of this guy."

She sobered as she watched him, unable to take her eyes off Nick's sleeping form. He was like a child when he slept—all the pain and worry and guilt of the past eight hundred years seemed to lift from him. "Is he all right?"

"Oh, he'll be hurting for another twenty-four hours at least." When Natalie turned her head, frowning, Paula shrugged. "I told him to drink twice his normal rate—that usually speeds the healing, although that crap he's got in the fridge . . . it's cow, isn't it?"

Natalie couldn't help but smile when she saw the expression on Paula's face—Nick was right, there was a 'cow blood' look. "Yes."

"Thought so. Nastiest stuff on earth. Don't know how he can survive on it." Paula gave a shudder as she looked at Nick, then met Natalie's gaze again. "You know there's not a hell of a lot that works on us. I offered him what I could, but he turned it down. I think—he wants to hold onto the pain."

Natalie closed her eyes in sorrow at the thought of how easily Paula had seen that in Nick. And how long had it taken *her* to figure out how deeply those wounds ran, what he did to himself in the name of guilt and retribution. "He feels guilty," she whispered.

"Well, he sure as hell should. After what he did to you—"

Her eyes shot open and she glared at Paula, tried to get her hand beneath her to sit up. "It wasn't his fault! *LaCroix*—"

"Easy, easy." Paula was on her feet, leaning over Natalie, pushing her back down against the pillow with a firm and not to be trifled with touch against the shoulder. "I'm not accusing—I'm just stating the facts. I don't know what happened here last night. It's none of my business. Knowing that LaCroix was involved is really *all* I need to know. But when it comes down to it, it's this one," she gestured toward Nick, then reseated herself, "who got you into this."

Natalie swallowed again and closed her eyes wearily. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yes."

"*I* made the deal with LaCroix." She opened her eyes and met Paula's disbelieving gaze. "I agreed to go through with this, not Nick. Nick didn't have any choice."

Paula let out a slow breath and looked away, at some blank spot on the wall at the far side of the room. "I was hoping one of you had a lick of sense. After talking to him last night, I was guessing it would be you." When she looked back at Natalie, her eyes were hard. "You're damn lucky, do you know that? Do you know how *stupid* that was? I'm not just talking about some very nasty, kinky sex. I'm talking about the blood."

She didn't blink. "I couldn't leave him. There was no other way out of it."

"You just keep believing that. In the mean time, let's get down to business." Paula drew her chair up a little closer. "I'm no specialist, but I did what I could for you."

Natalie nodded, her eyes widening. This wasn't going to be easy. "How bad . . . is it?"

"Nothing ruptured. There was no permanent damage, from what I could see—I saw that thing he put inside you and I don't know how you got through it. That's an external cage, not an internal toy. That should *never* have been—" Paula stopped suddenly, her voice softening, and squeezed Natalie's hand. "It's okay, sweetheart . . . it's gone. I got rid of it. You'll never see it again."

Natalie's suddenly realized that she was gripping Paula's hand very tightly. She smiled an apology and looked away, relieved at Paula's words. "I'll be okay, then?"

"Like I said, there was no permanent damage. You're torn up inside, but it's all abrasions. Unfortunately, they're gonna hurt like hell for a while. You've got muscles down there that have been stretched to their limits; they're gonna need to ease back." She touched a hand to Natalie's cheek getting her attention. "I've left a couple of pills with Nick and a list of stuff he's got to pick up for you. You take those pills like clockwork—the sedatives, the pain-killers, and the antibiotics. And don't be brave and skip the pain-killers. If you do it, you won't do it more than once, I promise you. And you're gonna scare the hell out of golden boy here."

Smiling at her description of Nick, Natalie nodded. "Okay. I guess driving home's out of the question, huh?"

"*Moving* is out of the question," said Paula firmly. "You stay here, in this bed, for four days—and believe me for the first two you're not gonna want to be anywhere else. Once that local anesthetic wears off, the feeling's gonna come back and it's not gonna be nice."

"Four days?" asked Natalie, bewildered. "But work—"

"Nick called you in sick for a couple of days, said you had an accident. I think he had a problem convincing the lady on the phone—"

"Grace?" asked Natalie hopefully.

"Yeah. That was it. I think he had a hard time convincing her that you two weren't planning on spending the week in bed." Paula looked past her, at Nick. "Which isn't too far from the truth, come to think of it. You are going to be out for a week—period. If you've got another week, take it. If you need a back up story, I'll certify you've got whatever you want to have and that you're on medical leave. But you plan on being bedridden for four days and then barely ambulatory for the next three after that. You on your feet a lot at work?"

"Yes."

"Then you stay home for another week. Or you stay here. I'd rather you stay here, because he can keep an eye on you. I said nothing's ruptured, but that doesn't mean that something won't, after the beating you took. If you start hemorrhaging, he'll know right away. You go straight to the hospital and then you have them call me—I'll leave you my card. Day or night, I'll be there. Have I scared you, yet?"

Natalie nodded tentatively. "Yes."

"Good," said Paula. "Because it gets worse. When I say off your feet, I mean *off-your-feet.* How do you feel about using a bedpan?" She smiled at Natalie's reaction. "I thought so. Medical people are *always* the worst patients. Fine—you gotta go, he carries you to the toilet, stays there with you, and carries you back. You're gonna have a trace of blood in your urine for the first forty-eight hours, don't worry about it as long as it's only a trace. And it's gonna sting like a bitch, too, but it won't hurt you any."

By this time, Natalie was biting her lip. She glanced over at Nick, but he was still sleeping.

"Don't be shy about anything, either. If you're in pain, you ask for a pill—he'll know whether or not to give it to you." Paula gestured toward Nick when Natalie looked back at her. "You'll need to have a couple of whirlpool baths—I gave him the list of what you'll need. You do exactly what I tell you, let him carry you wherever you need to go—he looks like a big, strong boy—wait on you hand and foot for a couple of days, then take it easy." Paula gave her a supportive smile. "Doesn't sound too bad, does it? Then again, you're the type that wants to do everything by yourself."

She didn't need to fake the wan smile that came to her lips—Paula was a good judge of character. "It's going to be hell."

"Hell or not, you let him do everything. And I mean *everything*. From what you've said and what I've seen, it'll be the best thing for him, help him work out some stuff." Then Paula's expression became serious. "In three weeks, I want you to see your gynecologist. Most of the lighter stuff will have healed by then and the other stuff will have scarred over—but I want him to check you out anyway. You tell him you and the boyfriend got carried away and it got a little rough. That's your story and you stick to it, okay?"

Natalie nodded, but cringed inwardly. She knew the questions she'd be facing, her doctor would certainly suspect rape immediately. With everyone in the station and the Coroner's office all too aware of her current relationship with Nick—it was something she'd have to avoid. "I don't know if he'll buy it."

"If you stick to your story, you'll be fine. Just be very embarrassed.

Mention 'experimentation.' He'll buy it—you'd have more problems with a female doctor." Paula sighed and looked down at her hands. "The next part is *not* open for debate—no intercourse for at least a month."

It was Natalie's turn to look away. She had no idea whether there *would* be a next time, now. "That might not be a problem."

"Uh-huh." When Natalie met her gaze, Paula was watching her intently. "Whatever you're thinking, trash it. It's the old 'falling off a horse' thing—you gotta get back on. But not too soon. And that goes for the both of you." Leaning forward, Paula took her hand again and squeezed it. "Four weeks—no intercourse. But that doesn't mean that you can't have a good time together. Get comfortable with each other again. Take it slow. No expectations, no schedules. If something happens, something happens. But don't be afraid to back off. And you make sure the same goes for him."

Some of the tension in Natalie's chest eased. She closed her eyes and decided not to deal with that issue right now. There were too many other things to consider, too many other problems to work out. After a moment, she opened her eyes and met saw Paula's concerned expression. "We'll work it out," she promised. "We haven't gone this far to give up now."

And, inwardly, she hoped like hell that she wasn't lying through her teeth, to herself, as well as Paula. What if he left her? What if he waited until she was well, and then just disappeared?

"Good." Leaning back in her chair, Paula asked "Now, will can do me a favor and tell me a few things?"

She didn't like the look in Paula's eye. "If I can . . . ."

"What the hell are you doing to his blood chemistry?"

Natalie blinked for a moment. "I'm not sure I know what you mean. Is it . . . that evident?"

"That you've been messing around with stuff you don't understand? I think so." She sighed and looked down at the floor. "Okay, we've never met before tonight, but I've heard of Nick—how he wants to become mortal and has spent that last eight-hundred years giving LaCroix fits. I always thought he was an idiot." Paula looked up and met Natalie's gaze squarely. "But after seeing you, seeing what you're willing to go through for him—maybe there's something in him after all. The point is, what you two have is unique. *Really* unique."

Natalie smiled softly and placed her hand over Nick's, which was still resting on her chest. "I guess it is."

"I'm serious. You *are* unique. I cleaned you out, so I saw the evidence—he climaxed and ejaculated . . . and he never bit you. Natalie, that just doesn't happen."

She hesitated, looked back at Nick's face again. "We've only had sex twice before. And then tonight—"

"No, I mean it. It just *doesn't* happen. Sex for us is blood. That's it, that's all. Some of us still like a little physical action—hey, old habits die hard." Paula was smiling sympathetically when Natalie glanced back at her. "But for the most part, the feeding is enough. That's the best and biggest kick we have. The women—well, most of us had faked it so often when we were alive we really couldn't tell the real thing anymore, but if we're old enough and we've got the control, we can usually make it through intercourse without killing our partner. Of course, there's not much point in it, but we *can* do it if we have to. And we can have a good time. But the guys . . . there's just no way." Paula hesitated. "Which means someone's been fooling around with his metabolism. I don't know whether it's the prolonged diet of cow blood—we *need* human blood and cow's a barely adequate substitute—or whatever else you're working on with him, but he's different now. *Really* different."

Something froze in Natalie's chest, a small and quiet fear that she might have been doing Nick more harm than good. It had appeared when she'd first decided to help him on his road back to mortality and after every failure, every mistake, it liked to rear its ugly heard and gnaw on her heart.

It was crunching merrily away right now.

"And that means?" she asked softly.

Paula shrugged. "I don't know. If he started feeding on human blood, stopped everything else you've got him doing . . . he might go back. Or he might not. This may be too far gone. He's in no immediate danger as far as I can see. He heals slowly. He's not as strong as he should be. Nor as fast." She leaned forward to grasp Natalie's hand. "The point is, you've gotta be careful. *Very* careful. Just like he's taken a couple of steps into your world, you've taken more than a couple into ours. They can't coexist. They're mutually exclusive."

Natalie licked her lips, considering the statement, then smiled. "I think we'll work it out."

"I hope like hell you can." She squeezed Natalie's hand and rose to her feet. "Card's on the bedside table—you have a problem, you call me. I mean that."

"Thank you," said Natalie sincerely. "I'd like—I'd like to talk to you some time. After this is—after I'm well."

"I'd like that, too." Paula hesitated at the door and turned. "But it's not a good idea. The less I know about you two, the less I have to tell anyone who comes snooping around. But if you've got a problem, you call me. We'll try to work it out."

That was the only good-bye. Natalie heard the elevator door slam shut and knew that her angel of mercy had left. She was left immobile in bed, half-floating on a cloud composed of pain-killers and anesthetic, waiting for them to wear off . . . and dreading that moment as well.

She drowsed, drifting in and out of consciousness. At one point she realized that Nick's arm was no longer resting on her chest, but she couldn't keep her eyes open long enough to do anything about it. She felt his weight beside her, and that was all she needed to know.

He was still there.

Minutes or hours could have passed. She was staring at the wall across from the bed and *knew* that she was staring at the wall across from the bed. When she turned her head to look at Nick, she found that his head was propped up on his hand and he was watching her.

His expression was sad and yet caring. When he saw that she was looking at him, he smiled slightly. But she could see the weariness in him; the lines in his face that sleep had eased were now back.

She remembered what had been done to him—the strain on his muscles from the taut chains, the barbs inside the collar scraping his neck, the straps of the cock cage restraining his flesh, the small spikes on the inside of the straps digging into him each time he entered her . . . .

Tears welled up in her eyes; she couldn't help herself. Immediately, the smile disappeared from his face and he reached for her, shifting himself to hold her against his chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispered through her tears, "I'm *so* sorry. I never meant to hurt you—"

Nick pulled back enough to meet her gaze, his fingers brushing away her tears. "Hurt *me*? Nat, I thought I'd *killed* you." He pressed his lips to her forehead and held her even more tightly—then very carefully released her and asked tentatively, "How do you feel?"

She thought for a moment, still blinking away her tears, but reassured by the presence of his arms around her and the whisper of his breath on her cheek. "Numb," she announced, after a few seconds more contemplation. "Paula said it should wear off in a little while."

"Paula?" She turned her head to see the moment of confusion mirrored in Nick's expression . . . which cleared almost immediately. "Oh, Dr. Corey."

Natalie smiled slightly and ducked her head so that Nick couldn't see.

"She gave me a list of things to pick up," he added, releasing her for one moment while he reached into the pocket of his shirt and withdrew a piece of paper. "You're supposed to take two pills at four—" He lifted his wrist, realized he wasn't wearing his watch, then leaned past her to check the clock on the nightstand. "Which isn't that far off." Nick placed his arms around her again, but this time she noticed a certain care in his movements, as if he thought she was fragile and might break. "She said to make sure you get those pills on time."

"She said the same thing to me." Natalie swallowed, wondering what she might be in for once the local anesthesia *did* wear off, if Paula had made enough of an impression on Nick about making certain she got her pills on time.

"Nat?"

There was a worried note in his voice. She forced a smile and met his gaze, realizing that she was experiencing the last effects of the anesthetic and was zoning. "I'm okay." Then she raised her hand to his face and let her fingers gently graze his cheek. "We'll both be okay. We'll get through this. Paula said—Paula said—" The intensity and concern in his gaze distracted her for a moment. "Paula said I couldn't have intercourse for a month."

Nick seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he looked past her—never a good sign. "I'm glad you're going to be all right. She said there wasn't anything permanent. As long as you take it easy—"

"Nick?" She placed a little pressure on the side of his face, making him meet her gaze. "I'm not afraid."

"But I am." For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, but his lips brushed her forehead as he held her close. "Nat, the chains broke. I could have killed you—"

"You were afraid LaCroix was going to kill me," she protested. "To tell you the truth, I'm kind of glad the chains broke."

His smile was sharp and unpleasant. Natalie quickly hid her face against his chest, knowing that he wasn't amused at anything she'd said. He was thinking about LaCroix. About what would happen the next time he caught up with his master.

"I won't give you up," she said firmly, wrapping her arms around his chest. "Not now. Not because of this. I won't let him win."

She was sniffling and the tears were starting to fall again. Nick's arms encircled her and he leaned his head on hers again. "Nat, it's all right. I'll never let him hurt you again—"

"Oh, yes you will."

The strength in her answer seemed to startle him. She pulled back from him to arm's length. "If you give up, if you're too afraid . . . he's won, hasn't he? He did just what he set out to do—stop us. Every time I look at you, remember what we had, and what we'll never have again . . . LaCroix wins. What we just went through, what *I* just went through, it was for nothing, wasn't it?"

What little color remained in his face disappeared at that. Nick pulled her into his arms again and whispered, his voice worn and rough with emotion, "No. Don't ever say that. What we did—what *you* did—"

There was only the touch of his lips against her hair for a moment, as he held her tightly. Then they touched her cheek. And then her mouth.

It was a tender kiss, a loving kiss . . . and bittersweet in its own way. How many more times would he kiss her before he disappeared?

Nick pulled back from her, his fingers wrapped in her hair. He smiled as he looked at her. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm wondering when you'll leave me."

He swallowed—she saw it—and looked away. That's when she knew that she was right, that he was thinking about it even now.

"You'd be better off without me." His fingers fell from her hair and she caught his hand. As he turned back to look at her, she raised his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles carefully.

Nick reacted like she'd burned him. He pulled his hand from her grasp and muttered, "I couldn't control myself. I *bit* you."

"I bit you back," she reminded him.

There was a touch of color in his cheeks—she was *very* glad to see that and not above taking advantage of the opportunity. Natalie'd realized very soon after awakening that she didn't have a stitch on underneath the blanket. Letting the edge of it slip slightly, she said, "It's not that bad. Come on—I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Nat—" There was that look on his face—warning, mixed with a glint of that light-hearted joy she'd discovered in him. The joy won out as he carefully replaced her blanket. "You have no idea what that did to me, do you?" He placed his hand on the blanket covering her chest, directly over the spot where he'd bitten her.

"No. I didn't. But I'll remember for next time." She quickly touched his lips with a finger, as he was about to protest. "I can't stop you from leaving, but I can stop you from making this mistake. I want you to make love to me one more time before you leave."

He straightened, pulling away from her slightly, but the hand he'd rested on her chest now cupped her chin, making her eyes meet his. "If I do that, I'll never be able to leave you."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

She knew then that she had him, at least for a little while. Nick released his hold on her and leaned in to kiss her lips, nibbling along her lower lip for a moment before pulling back from her. "I'd better head out to pick up the things Dr. Corey mentioned. If I don't leave now, I don't think I'll ever get out of here." Nick reached into his shirt pocket, then appeared slightly bewildered for a moment as he glanced around. "The list—? I had it a minute ago—"

Natalie fell back against the pillow and felt something crinkle. "Wait—I think—" She raised her head and lifted the piece of paper out from beneath her, but didn't hand it over when Nick reached for it. Instead, she opened it, trying to ignore the twinge that she felt from the muscle on the inside of her right leg—feeling was returning.

Paula's list was thorough and down to the last detail. Natalie smiled as she noticed just *how* detailed; Paula had left nothing to chance. Even the flannel nightgown listed for her had an exact size and a suggestion of a flower print. What *did* alarm her was the number and cost of the items—

Nick moved closer, his hands adjusting her hair on the pillow. "What's wrong?"

She realized then that she was frowning. "Nick—a whirlpool unit for your bathtub? Do you have any idea how much that will cost?"

"You're worth it." When she continued to frown, he smiled and touched her cheek gently. "I'm going to take care of you."

Her frown deepened. "I don't need—"

"Yes, you *do*." He took the paper from her hands, folded it and tucked it into his shirt pocket. Then he touched her chin, turning her gaze toward him. "I *am* going to take care of you."

"There's no need, really," she said, realizing a few seconds later that her protest had been pathetically weak. Sighing, she set her chin defiantly, shaking off his touch. "I'll be fine at home. Grace would be happy to stop by to check on me and feed Sydney—"

"I'm going to take care of you," repeated Nick in a very low tone; it was so authoritative that it sent a cold chill down her spine. But then his hand caressed her cheek in so loving and tender a manner that she knew that he wasn't trying to scare her—he just wasn't going to take no for an answer. "You'll stay here. I'll pick up Sydney after sunset. Whatever you need, just tell me. Whatever you *want*, just tell me."

His tone of voice grew more earnest as he spoke. There was something wounded in him that she couldn't turn away from, didn't dare refuse. Paula was right, Nick needed to do this for her. He *needed* to take care of her.

To be honest, something inside of her needed him to do it. So she covered his hand with her own, concentrated on the feel of his palm against her cheek . . . and tried desperately to ignore the growing discomfort in other parts of her body, now that the drug was wearing off.

"I can never make this up to you," said Nick softly, again leaning forward so that he could hold her in his arms. "Nothing I could do would *ever*. . . ."

His voice was lost in her hair as he buried his face against her. She wanted to tell him that there *was* something he could do—he could stay. He could stay and never leave her. He could stay and be young and handsome and loving forever—

No, better not to think about that.

She heard the tears in his voice, the sorrow in him, and raised her arms to hold him to her. Her hand caressing the taut muscles of his shoulders. "Nick—it's all right," she said quietly, blinking away her own tears. "It wasn't your fault. *I* made the deal with LaCroix. I never thought he'd let me hurt you that much. You tried to stop him. You didn't tell him I was going to be here—"

"But . . . I told him that we'd made love." He pulled back from her embrace for a moment, his eyes meeting hers, even as that quiet admission of guilt swept through her with the sudden rage of a summer thunderstorm. "I told him. I threw it in his face. I told him that you'd saved me. That you'd take me out of the darkness he'd led me into."

Natalie's instant anger faded at the look in his eyes, the absolute hopelessness of his gaze. Nick was confessing to her and she knew that he didn't dare to even hope for her forgiveness or understanding. He was letting her know just how thoroughly and completely he'd damned himself.

And she *did* understand. It was just as she'd suspected—he had no one to talk to. At least, not with Janette gone. The other vampires would simply laugh if he spoke of his dreams of mortality, of children, of living and dying in the light. And mortals would never get past the idea of his being a vampire. Only Schanke, perhaps, could have been told in such a way that those questions could have been avoided. Nick was his friend; he would have accepted any explanation within or outside reason.

But Schanke was gone.

Nick's eyes were still fearful, still haunted, as he stared down at her, waiting for her judgment upon him. But she wasn't about to deliver the fire and brimstone he expected. Instead, Natalie touched her hand to his cheek, cupping it, and he leaned into her caress, his eyes closing. "We have to find you some new friends," she said softly.

His eyes opened, quizzical, not quite grasping her comment. It made her smile to see him like that—perplexed. She wondered just how many of his centuries had been spent in a fog of bewilderment.

Just as he smiled down at her, finally deciding that she understood his words and yet had found it in her heart not to condemn him, the first stab of pain shot through her lower torso. Natalie had just enough warning to turn her head, biting her lip to cover the groan that erupted from somewhere other than her need to care for and love this psychologically-wounded vampire.

Nick's reaction was immediate—his weight disappeared from beside her and the bed settled. Before she could do more than blink, he was standing on the other side of the bed with a glass of water in one hand and a bottle of pills in the other. "Dr. Corey said to take two," he informed her, shaking the required number of capsules from the bottle to the table, then setting it aside. He picked up the capsules and sat down on the bed beside her.

"No." Natalie breathed once, deeply—it seemed to help—then forced herself to smile up at him . . . although it felt like someone was methodically flaying her from the inside out. "I don't need those."

"Yes, you do." Nick reached for her hand and placed the pills in her palm. Then he lifted her enough so that she wouldn't spill the water. "And you'll take them. Or I'll sit here and wait until you do, even if it means I have to track down the things from Dr. Corey's shopping list in daylight."

However much she was tempted to call his bluff, Natalie met his eyes . . . and decided that it wasn't worth it. She raised the pills to her mouth, but quickly palmed them again and sipped at the water, making a show of swallowing. She smiled.

At least until Nick reached down and pried open her hand, revealing the presence of both pills. "Take them," he told her firmly. Just as she was about to give him a lecture on her knowing best about what medication she needed and when she needed it, something in his gaze softened and he added, "Please? Nat . . . I can't bear seeing you in pain."

That's when Natalie discovered that guilt was a two-way street. More affected by that sorrowful stare than she would have liked to admit, she took one of the two pills. She pretended to take both, but managed to palm at least one successfully, tucking it between the folds of the blanket so that Nick wouldn't notice that she'd avoided swallowing all of her medication.

It was quite a production and seemed to satisfy him. He placed a hand on her head lightly, then leaned down to plant a quick kiss on her cheek. "Sleep. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He was half way across the room when she asked, "And what happens to me if you don't come back?"

Nick froze in mid-movement, his back straightening—she'd caught him. "What?"

"You're going to look for LaCroix."

The accusation hit right between his shoulder blades; she knew that because she saw him tense. For an instant, she thought he was going to walk out, but then he turned very slowly, fists clenched. There was such a look of hatred on his face that she was afraid for his sanity, never mind his soul. "He hurt you."

"He hurt both of us. But we let him and we can't blame him for that." She raised her hands up and he walked over to take them, standing beside the bed. "Say you find him—I know you want to kill him. What happens to me if he kills you?"

He hadn't gotten that far—she could tell by the sudden thoughtfulness of his expression. Seating himself on the bed, her hands still clasped in his, Nick bowed his head. "I'll never let anything happen to you."

"Ditto." He looked up at the comment, meeting her eyes with a wan smile. "Okay, so I can't protect you from other big, bad vampires . . . much. But I can stop you from making a mistake. After what happened here tonight, you're not in great shape and a couple of bottles of blood are not going to make a hell of a difference. He'll wipe the floor with you. He might even kill you. And then . . . he'll come after me."

There was a sudden distance in Nick's eyes and he glanced toward the shuttered window, as if not wanting to contemplate the possibility. Natalie freed her hands from his and cradled his face with her fingertips, so that he'd look at her again. "He'd be doing me a favor," she said softly. "Because I don't think I want to live without you, now."

His hands covered hers. "Ditto," he answered lightly, then reached down to touch his lips to hers.

It was an affirmation of the sentiment. She reveled in it for a moment—being an enjoyable distraction from the pain she was experiencing—then felt him pull away. But not *too* far away.

Nick sat up and sighed. "You're right. It would mean that he'd won. I won't let him do that—I can't let him tear us apart."

A small searing pain rippled through her, but she barely felt it, hearing those words from him. Her hands rested on the blanket and he toyed with her fingers again, measuring them against his own, warm to cold. Nick smiled faintly.

"What?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Something Dr. Corey said." He cleared his throat, looking away for a moment as if embarrassed. "I don't think she has much faith in my ability to care for you."

Natalie wanted to laugh—he *could* catch a clue a now and again. Instead, she pretended to remain serious. "What makes you say that?"

"She said—" There was an embarrassed silence again, but when his eyes met her own, she saw there was a smile hidden somewhere behind them. "She said that if anything happened to you, she'd stake me, leave me in the sunlight, then collect my ashes and scatter them in front of a women's crisis center the next time the streets iced over, because then she'd be sure I'd be doing good for *someone*."

Natalie put her hands over her face and laughed, inwardly hearing Paula's voice making just such a threat . . . *and* meaning it. She heard Nick chuckling as well, but by the time she lowered her hands from her face, his expression was serious. He touched a hand to her hair, arranging it on the pillow. "You should sleep. And I've got a few things to pick up."

"I'm afraid I'm a lousy patient," she warned him.

He smiled, unperturbed, and rose from the bed. With two fingers, Nick lifted the list from his shirt pocket and informed her, "No problem. Dr. Corey left her number and told me to call her the minute you gave me any trouble. She said she'd run the lights this time."

Natalie raised her eyebrows. "Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a promise."

His expression was serious enough to give her a moment's pause. Sinking down beneath the warmth of the covers, she muttered, "I'll be good."

"That's what I thought."

It was becoming difficult to say good-bye, even for the few hours he'd be away. Once she took the second pill, she knew she'd be out like a light and probably wouldn't even notice he was gone. But . . . .

Nick seemed to be having the same problem. He stood at her bedside, staring down at her, then suddenly leaned over and kissed her, his arms grasping her shoulders and almost lifting her from the bed. It wasn't the brightest thing in the world to do, considering her condition, and there were some bits of her that were *very* unhappy at the sudden manhandling. Mentally, she shushed them and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on for dear life as he let her know just how much he cared for her. He was wrong that one time—maybe she hadn't known exactly how much he cared for her then . . . but she was beginning to get a pretty good idea of it now.

Then he was gone, just like that. She was suddenly lying on the bed again, blankets askew, hands deprived of the mass of his chest and shoulders, lips deprived of that insistent and loving touch. Nick left only a cool breeze in his wake, the barest sign of his passing, and an echo of the elevator door as it closed downstairs.

Natalie allowed herself the luxury of simply resting there for a moment, the cool touch of his lips a present memory on her own. She could feel the pill beginning to do its work, a numb feeling spreading throughout her. With a slight shake of her head, she forced herself back to matters at hand, arranging the blankets around her and pretending that she looked at least presentable. God only knew when she'd finally get a shower—maybe tomorrow?—or a

good soak in the tub. She was entertaining a faint and not unpleasant thought of conning Nick into giving her a sponge bath when she heard a sound.

Not a loud sound, certainly. It was barely a whisper. When LaCroix appeared, stepping into the bedroom, she wasn't at all surprised.

The flowers and box of candy he held rather lackadaisically *were* somewhat unexpected. LaCroix walked over to the bed and presented her with the flowers, explaining, "I believe these are the current offerings for a recovering invalid."

Natalie left her hands on the blanket, but nodded toward the dresser. "You can put them over there. What took you so long?"

LaCroix moved to the dresser and placed the flowers and heart-shaped box on the dresser top. "Discretion being the better part of valor . . . Nicholas took his time." He looked over at her, an eyebrow raised. "Am I to assume that parting was such sweet sorrow?"

"Are we going to talk or are you going to stand there and quote Shakespeare at me until sunrise?"

"If you don't mind, I'll have a seat." LaCroix pulled the chair he'd sat in earlier across to the bedside and seated himself. "You expected me?"

Natalie allowed herself the luxury of a soft smile. "It made sense. You had to come by to apologize. Or explain."

His eyelids lowered slightly and LaCroix leaned back in the chair, regarding her thoughtfully. "Surely you're not sentimental enough to believe that I came here to *apologize*?"

"No. You came here because Nick wants to rip your head off."

He blinked, then smiled. "How astute. That's where I made my error, you know." Leaning forward with a confidential air, LaCroix clasped his hands together and let them hang between his knees. "We've clashed so often in the recent past that I've gained some respect for your tenacity and your intelligence. I underestimated you."

"You thought I'd take one look at Nick trussed up like an S & M toy and I'd run?" she asked, letting her surprise color her tone. "You're right—you *did* underestimate me."

He frowned and hung his head. "So it seems. All you had to do was walk away. I couldn't believe you'd put yourself, or him, through so much pain. I waited for you to say 'no.'"

"And I didn't."

"No. You didn't." He flinched and looked up at her with a measuring gaze that wiped away some of the victorious feeling that she felt. "If anything, that makes you even more of a danger."

Natalie swallowed, pinned by that intense gaze, and wondered just how badly she'd miscalculated. "But . . . you need me."

A slight flicker of annoyance, then LaCroix sank back into the chair again. "*Nicholas* needs you," he corrected.

"He needs you, too."

She'd caught him by surprise. LaCroix's smile was sharp, almost bitter. "And on what false premise do you base that erroneous conclusion?"

"He told you about us. That we were having sex." She took no small amount of joy from the fact that LaCroix blinked at her again. "Yes, he told me."

"Did he?" There was genuine interest in LaCroix's tone of voice. If anything, his expression became more thoughtful as he looked away. "You may be having more of an effect on him than I'd believed."

"Nick needs you. He needs someone who knows what he is, what the vampire is. He needs someone to talk to, who'll understand what he's going through. I think . . . I think you're all he has left."

He didn't look at her, but gestured, as if waiting for her to continue. "That's quite an admission, coming from someone who despises what we are."

"I don't despise you for being a vampire." Another flicker of his eyelids—Natalie smiled inwardly, but forced herself to remain calm despite the points she was scoring. The pill was working and she didn't know how much longer she'd be lucid. Her legs were already beginning to feel very numb and heavy. "I despise you for what you've done to Nick. You've meant well—I understand that—but you've gotten it all wrong. And now he's so twisted up inside he doesn't know what he wants anymore."

LaCroix seemed amused. "Thank you for your analysis of the situation, Doctor. I assume you've come to a conclusion as to a suitable treatment for this malady?"

"Yes." Natalie waited until he looked back at her, his eyes locking with her own. "We let Nick choose."

His smile was genuine. "Ah, but you see, you're right . . . he doesn't know what he wants."

"Then we give him enough room to choose. We try to provide him with some sort of stability. I'll work on bringing him back across to mortality, while you handle the vampire stuff. When he works it out, he'll know what he wants. But if we keep pulling on him, we're going to tear him apart . . . and us with him."

She was right to have phrased it that way—LaCroix couldn't make sense of her willingness to sacrifice everything for Nick, but he understood self-

preservation and self-interest. She briefly wondered if that was why he'd never seemed to have had a problem with Janette.

"You're proposing a truce?" he asked, after a moment's consideration.

"Of sorts. We both have an immediate problem with Nick—he wants to kill you and he's so terrified that he's going to kill me that I'm afraid he'll take off once I'm back on my feet."

"You want me to play the villain of the piece. Am I correct?"

He was catching onto the way she thought. Natalie swallowed and steeled herself, nodding her agreement. "Yes—for a while. I've pointed out to him that he's in no state to take you on right now. And that if he lost to you, I'd be next."

"Omitting the fact that you're beneath my notice," said LaCroix offhandedly. "But you're correct in that—Nicholas has never understood that his own warped values aren't shared by those of us with common sense." He steepled his fingers for a moment and rested his chin on them. "And the threat of what I might do with you after he left . . . yes, that would also keep him here. Very good. Excellent. And what incentive do *I* have to participate in your scheme?"

"Other than the fact that I'm the only thing that's keeping Nick from tearing out your heart and feeding it to you?" His eyes lost some of their glitter at her comment, but she pressed on. "Like I said, he needs you whether or not he knows it. I'm the only one who can stop him from killing you. Given time, I might even be able to convince him that he doesn't want your head mounted on a plaque over the fireplace."

"Really?" His eyes narrowed. "Given time . . . how much *time*?"

"That depends on him. And on you. Although if I were you, I'd make myself scarce for at least a month, maybe a little longer."

"A month." LaCroix pushed back the chair and rose to his feet. "Very well."

He towered over the bed, his shadow falling down upon her. For a moment all Natalie could make out were his eyes. They shone gold for a moment, then went back to the steely, soulless gray she was becoming used to. "I believe we have a 'deal,' as they say. And as for you, *dear* Natalie—"

She tried not to flinch as he reached down toward her. After a questioning look, he picked up the other pill from between the folds of the blanket and placed it into her palm. "You really should be more careful about taking your medication. You *are* mortal after all."

She was stunned when he took the glass of water from the bedside table, handing it to her. So stunned, in fact, that she took it. Then stared at him, the pill in one hand and the water glass in the other.

"None for me, thank you," he said lightly. "But don't let me stop you."

With more than a little surprise, Natalie realized that LaCroix wasn't going to leave until she took her medication. And with Nick coming back God only knew when—

She opened her mouth, popped in the pill, then took a good swig of water to chase it down her throat. LaCroix took the glass from her hand—but his fingers still encased hers for a moment, long and cool—and he leaned down toward her. "You know that the sooner you regain your health, the sooner I'll return. So you must make an effort to get well—for my sake."

His smile sent a chill through her and yet angered her at the same time. But Natalie knew enough not to show either emotion. "Too bad you didn't think about that earlier."

"Ah, yes. That was my mistake. In many ways, I underestimated you. But in others—I hold your intellectual talents in high regard. In such high regard that I often forget that you're not a vampire . . . you're only a mortal." His fingers caressed hers for a moment longer. "The pity of it is mortals break far too easily."

There was a warning pressure—not enough to hurt her, but to let her know that he was there, and then he was gone. Natalie waited, counting heartbeats—her pulse was just a little too fast, did he notice?—but LaCroix didn't reappear.

So she relaxed, the second pill kicking in and doubling the effect of the first. She felt weary beyond her years, older than time and twice as heavy. But time was all it was about, wasn't it? Taking time to heal. Taking time to mend what had broken between her and Nick, and then between Nick and LaCroix. Because Nick *did* need LaCroix.

Just as Nick needed her. They were opposites, each tugging Nick in a different direction. But Nick had to decide his own fate. She didn't want to become LaCroix's opposite, forcing Nick into a life he didn't really want or understand. Nor could she just walk away and let LaCroix turn Nick into something he loathed. It was a fine line to walk. A *very* fine line. And at the end, it would be Nick's choice whether he walked in the dark or the light.

She drifted off somewhere in between, only to be woken to a half-light when her shoulder was shaken, Nick's voice calling, "Nat? Nat?"

"S you back?" she mumbled groggily. She tried to open her eyes, decided they were too heavy, then let her lids fall closed again.

"Nat?" More words she didn't understand, then she was being jostled again. "Nat? These flowers—this candy—who—?"

"'S LaCroix. 'Sall right—he 'pologized." She smiled and actually managed to get her eyes half- open. "Said he's . . . sorry."

Nick's hand touched her neck, turning her head this way and that. She leaned her head on his hand and managed to catch it between her neck and her shoulder—his skin was so soft and cool.

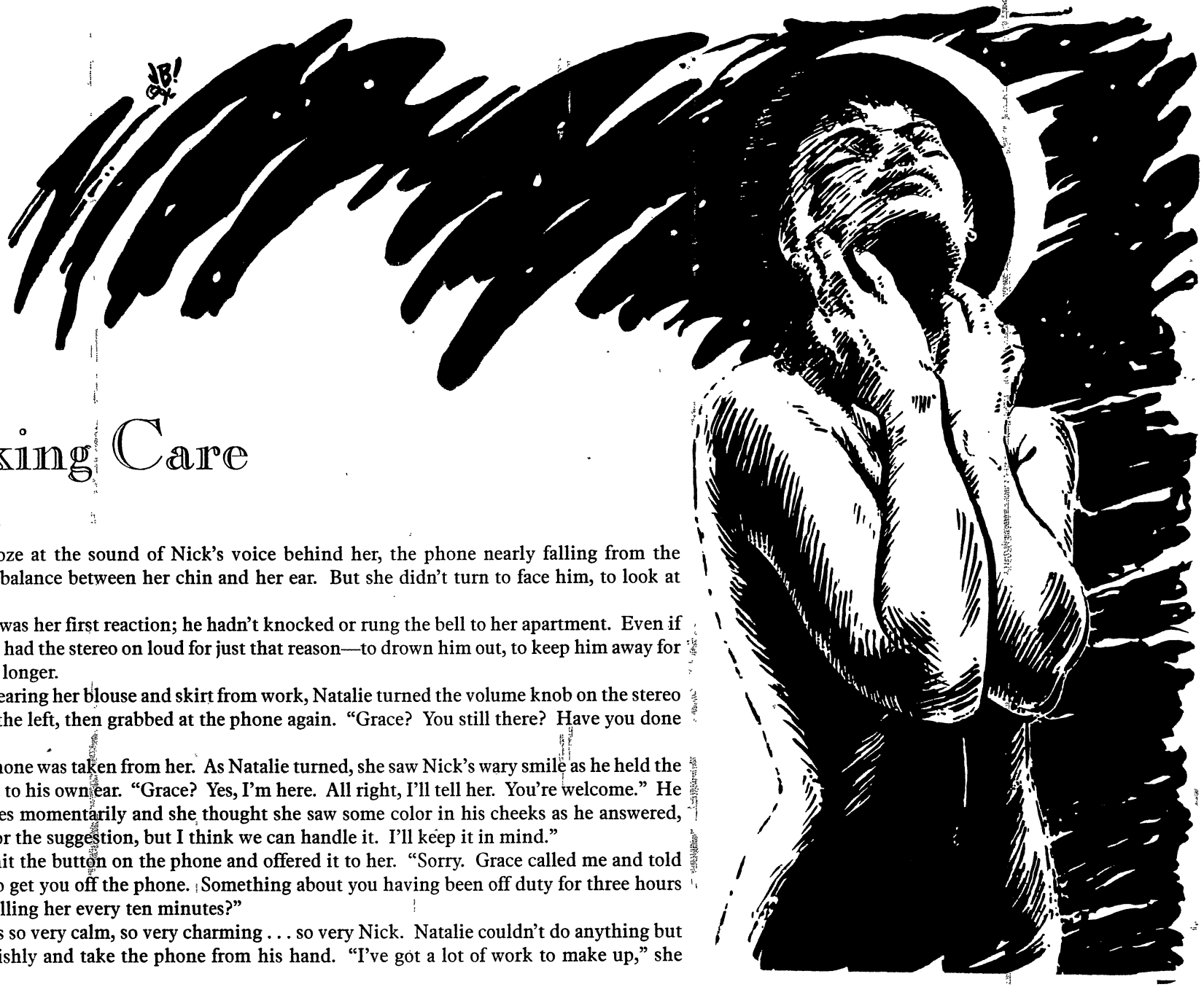
"You're all right," said Nick, his voice relieved. "Nat? You're all right?"

"Sure." She smiled up at him, then yawned and turned her head, because she couldn't quite cover her mouth—why was her hand so heavy? "Fine. Sleepy . . . ."

She felt his hand caress her cheek, then tangle in her hair. There was a light touch of cool lips on her forehead and the blankets were rearranged around her. The bed sunk slightly and she felt the weight of him beside her as he sat down. "I won't let anything happen to you, Nat. I promise. I won't leave you again."

"'S nice." She slipped into the darkness again, but this time secure because there were strong arms around her, and the scent of his cologne and his leather jacket, and the touch of his lips on her cheek.

And Nick wasn't going to leave her. Ever.



Taking Care

"Nat?"

She froze at the sound of Nick's voice behind her, the phone nearly falling from the precarious balance between her chin and her ear. But she didn't turn to face him, to look at him.

Anger was her first reaction; he hadn't knocked or rung the bell to her apartment. Even if he had, she had the stereo on loud for just that reason—to drown him out, to keep him away for just a little longer.

Still wearing her blouse and skirt from work, Natalie turned the volume knob on the stereo sharply to the left, then grabbed at the phone again. "Grace? You still there? Have you done the—?"

The phone was taken from her. As Natalie turned, she saw Nick's wary smile as he held the receiver up to his own ear. "Grace? Yes, I'm here. All right, I'll tell her. You're welcome." He met her eyes momentarily and she thought she saw some color in his cheeks as he answered, "Thanks for the suggestion, but I think we can handle it. I'll keep it in mind."

Nick hit the button on the phone and offered it to her. "Sorry. Grace called me and told me I had to get you off the phone. Something about you having been off duty for three hours and still calling her every ten minutes?"

He was so very calm, so very charming . . . so very Nick. Natalie couldn't do anything but grin sheepishly and take the phone from his hand. "I've got a lot of work to make up," she

offered, a half-hearted explanation at best. Crossing the living room, she placed the phone in its cradle, still keeping her back to him. "Bodies only keep so long, even in cold storage. We've got killers to catch, right?"

She heard him walk across the room, felt him standing behind her—not close enough to touch, thank heavens, but there. "How are you?"

Natalie swallowed. How to answer that one? Particularly since it had been four weeks to the day that she'd made him take her home after her two week convalescence at his loft, three weeks since she'd been back at work—despite Paula's orders to the contrary—and at least a week since she'd seen him.

"Nat?" he asked softly.

The fear in his voice ripped at her heart. Somehow, she forced a wan smile and turned to face him. "I'm . . . okay."

He took a step closer, eyes very cautious. "Are you?" Another step toward her.

She turned away again, focusing on the curtain at the window. It was fraying in the corner. She'd need to fix that. How did things like that get damaged, anyway? No one ever touched it and it was too high for Sydney to reach . . . .

"You've been working day shift."

Just a statement. Or an accusation masquerading as a statement. Or a question masquerading as an accusation masquerading as a—

"I thought—" Her voice faltered and stumbled over the word as she felt him draw nearer. Closing her eyes, Natalie fought to keep her tone even. "I thought . . . maybe I needed a change. I've been so tired since . . . easier for my body to catch up with normal hours. Besides, it's been a while since I've seen a corpse in sunlight. Adds a certain cachet to the whole thing, y'know?"

"No. I wouldn't. It's been awhile since I've had that privilege."

She could hear the frustration in his voice, the questions that he wasn't asking—why she hadn't answered his calls, why she'd avoided him even on the few occasions this week when their shifts had crossed—and silently prayed that he'd continue not to ask them.

The silence was infinitely worse. Another step and he moved closer still—if she turned she'd touch him. She was determined not to turn. Not now. Not yet.

"I was worried. And . . . I've missed you."

It was so a small thing, his fingers brushing her hair from her shoulder, the lightest touch against her neck . . . and she shuddered. A small, frightened sound escaped her lips before she made the effort to lock them shut.

Physically he remained close, but as she turned Natalie realized that the distance between them had instantly grown insurmountable. Panic struck her when she saw the resignation in his eyes, the sad acceptance of that sudden revulsion she'd shown him.

"I'm sorry," Nick whispered. His hand half-raised as if to touch her face, then he pulled it back slowly. The fingers clenched into a fist, which dropped to his side. His expression seemed to dissolve into a mask void of emotion, cold and impenetrable. "I won't bother you again."

Then he was gone, the sound of the front door closing behind him barely echoing in the room before she'd had a chance to move.

It was his eyes that haunted her. No matter how much he'd tried to mask the hurt, how good he was at pretending that she was just another speck of dust in his already filled-to-overflowing hourglass, his eyes betrayed him. She saw the hurt there, the loss, the self-recrimination . . . .

Natalie closed her eyes, her own hands clenching into fists as she faced her own bout of blame. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*! How could she have done that? It was too soon, that was all. Too soon. She'd felt guilty about holding so tightly to him, wanted to give him some space, give herself some space. If she'd only told him that, if she'd done something else, said something else—

Her eyes shot open in panic. Nick was gone and only God knew where he'd end up. She had to find him. She couldn't let it end like this. She couldn't let him think . . . what the hell *could* he think? That she hated him? That she loathed him for what he'd done?

It hadn't been his fault. She had to let him know that. Just as she had to keep her own fears bottled deep within her heart. That was the way it always was. If Nick was going to leave her—fine. But not like this. If he left it would be *his* choice to leave. And if he stayed . . . *that* had to be his choice as well.

A lump in her throat, she ran to the door, grabbing her purse and car keys on the way. Natalie snatched up her coat in reflex, moved out into the hall, then turned to lock the door behind her. Her fingers shook as she fumbled with the key in the lock and she cursed at it, demanding that it fit.

It did, of course, in time. But she didn't *have* time. She had to go . . . where?

She took the steps out of her apartment building and down to the street more slowly as she considered. By the time she'd reached her car she'd decided on the Raven first, then the loft. The club was on the way, after all. Nick might just go there. He might need something stronger than the cow blood in his refrigerator and much as she valued their relationship, she doubted—or perhaps 'hoped'—that this setback wouldn't be enough to reawaken the need to kill. The Raven would be a place to find bottled human blood.

The Raven would be *the* place to find LaCroix.

The thought helped her make it to her car in one piece. That was one confrontation she couldn't let happen. The last thing she wanted was Nick playing knight-errant and confronting LaCroix on her behalf. If she wanted to confront LaCroix, she'd do it on her own, damn it. She didn't need him bruising his ego and breaking glass to protect her . . . especially when he'd done so much more during the past few weeks.

She'd awakened with a groan when the medication had finally worn off. Pain had been a very large part of her immediate reintroduction to reality . . . and so was Nick, suddenly beside her, tapping pills into his palm and coaxing her to swallow them with water.

Having had just enough self-possession to know that one and one still equaled two, Natalie had managed to get across to him that she'd be more than happy to take one pill, but if she took both she'd never make it to the bathroom . . . which was her second priority, right after finding something that would downgrade her agony from a raging inferno to a dull roar. That had led to a brief argument about how, exactly, she would *get* to the bathroom—which Nick had won when she'd lifted the covers and found that not only was she wearing a large and comfortable flannel nightgown, but that there were certain limbs that hurt too much to move. Nick had resorted to threats about calling Paula before Natalie had relented.

He'd lifted her with such care that she'd slapped him lightly, promising him that she wouldn't break. But the bathroom had led to a second encounter—Nick had placed her on the toilet, but he hadn't left the room.

She'd waited for a few seconds, bladder ready to burst and her nightgown bunched up on the back but falling demurely over her front and legs, before she'd realized that he had no intention of leaving. "Shoo," she'd told him. "You can wait outside. The pill won't kick in for a while. I'll be fine."

Nick had smiled and shaken his head, his refusal adamant. "Dr. Corey said I should stay."

"Paula said—?" She'd contemplated the statement for a moment, then nodded her grudging acceptance as he'd leaned casually against the wall across from her. "Okay. I'd think twice about bucking Paula. But . . . no listening."

He'd raised his eyebrows, then pointedly fixed his complete attention on the shower nozzle as if it suddenly seemed a likely source of impending disaster. That didn't do much to ease the awkwardness of the situation for her, but it did allow her to begin to urinate.

The trickle stopped almost as soon as it started, her muscles cramping and pulling taut to cut off the flow. It *burned*. And not just that irritating, annoying burn of a casual yeast infection or a scrape. It *hurt*.

She heard a whimper and wasn't entirely certain that it had come from her until she found Nick was on his knees beside her, his hands on her face, lifting her chin so that she would look at him. "Nat?"

The tears were welling up in her eyes and she couldn't stop them. The drugs had just begun to work and that and the humiliation of the situation broke down what little was left of her reserve. She began to sob, hopelessly embarrassed, and unable to stop. The fullness of her bladder only added to the torment. She wanted to die.

He'd placed his arms around her and held her, so that she cried into his shoulder. Nick had stroked her hair and muttered soothing sounds, which had seemed to help after a little bit. Then he'd very gently pulled back from her and looked into her eyes. "Dr. Corey warned me you might have a problem. There doesn't seem to be any hemorrhaging, does there?"

His voice had been quiet and steady. She'd forced herself to focus on his expression and his eyes and had sniffled slightly as she thought about his question. If she'd started bleeding, Nick would have known it. He was trying to bring her back to a clinical way of thinking, detaching her from her pain.

"No," she'd answered, after a pause, voice shaking. "No. It just . . . hurts."

"Do you want me to give you the other pill?"

After the brief splatter of urine, the pressure on her bladder had begun to feel life-threatening. Natalie shook her head and bit her lip, knowing that she couldn't wait until the pill took effect. "I can't. I can't wait."

"Then you have to go."

It had been simple when he'd said it. The solution had been so very obvious.

And painful.

She'd shaken her head again and closed her eyes, thinking that if she ignored the pressure of her full bladder, it might just go away.

"Nat—"

His voice had been soft, but filled with warning. When she could bring herself to look at him, she'd blurted, "But it *hurts*!"

Nick's arms had wrapped around her again, protecting her as best he could . . . and comforting her because that was really all he could do. "I know," he'd whispered, as she'd sobbed into his shoulder again. "I know. Trust me. It'll be okay."

After it was over, when she'd cried herself beyond tears and the pain had been offset by the medication, he'd left her for a moment. Natalie had rested her head in a towel bunched over her lap and knees, face still flushed red with humiliation. Distantly, she'd heard running water and looked up.

Nick had run a bath for her. He added something to the water, then he'd

leaned in to test the temperature with his hand. When he'd realized she was watching, he'd smiled at her, said, "Dr. Corey's orders," and risen to his feet.

It took her a minute to realize that he was offering her the second pill and she took it this time without any qualms. Nick somehow got her to lift her arms up and removed her nightgown with a deft skill that probably would have alarmed her if she hadn't been zoning on pain killers.

The bath was only a hazy memory—being lifted into a bath chair Nick had placed in the tub, then being gently buoyed by the warm water. Her muscles had relaxed and she'd had enough presence of mind to know that she was missing out on enjoying a wonderful experience. Nick had been careful, and gentle in his treatment of her, expertly washing her hair and rinsing her off as she drowsed. When he'd lifted her from the tub, she'd had less than an instant to feel the chill of the air on her water-soaked skin before she had been wrapped in a large fluffy towel. She'd drifted off into a sound slumber somewhere between being dried and dressed in a fresh nightgown and tucked into bed again.

Two days she'd spent in that blissful nirvana, being cared for and comforted. He'd fed her soup while soft music wafted from a CD player somewhere in the background, and kept her clean and dry and warm.

When she'd finally awakened from her drugged stupor and the pain wasn't quite as bad as it had been, she'd hesitated before moving. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness after a few seconds and she'd looked around, knowing somehow that Nick was nearby.

He'd been asleep in a chair by the bed, head bowed forward and resting on his chest. There had been a book on the floor; it must have fallen out of his hand when he'd fallen asleep. He'd looked utterly and completely exhausted and yet his sleep was uneasy—his head turned, a hand shifted, and he muttered quiet sounds beneath his breath as he dreamed.

She'd watched him for a time, frowning as he twitched. Natalie had known full well that when Nick slept, he didn't suffer from tossing and turning. She'd seen him dead to the world on the couch often enough. When *had* Nick last had a good night's sleep? He'd been completely out of it immediately after their encounter with LaCroix. Even through the drugged haze of the past few days, she couldn't remember the weight of his body sinking the bed beside her . . . which meant he'd exiled himself to the couch or to the chair, watching her while *she'd* slept.

Finally, she'd reached out a hand to touch his shoulder— N i c k had jumped from the chair, awake instantly. For a moment she'd thought she'd spotted a hint of gold in his eyes, but that had given way to a concerned blue. "Nat—uh—are you okay? Your pills—"

He'd been close enough to the nightstand to reach it easily. In his haste, he'd knocked over the bottle, spilling the pills.

Natalie had caught his hand, pulling herself to something more resembling a sitting position . . . and found that it didn't hurt quite so much as she'd thought it would. The movement caused him to stop, to meet her eyes, and she smiled at him in reassurance. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't sleeping." A light smile had been the answer when she'd raised an eyebrow. "Just resting my eyes." Nick had seated himself on the bed beside her, her hand still holding his. He'd looked down at it in wonder. "You need to take your pills."

"No." The comment had earned her a sharp look from him, but she'd frowned, determined to stand her ground. "I don't need them—at least, I don't need that dosage. Not now. I'm pretty sure I'm through the worst of it."

"I think we should have a second opinion on that—"

"I know what I'm doing. I'm a doctor, all right?"

There'd been an instant of cold in his features, a falling of a mask over his face as he'd turned his head away. Natalie had cleared her throat. "I'll be okay. Really."

She'd squeezed his hand to regain his attention—it worked, because he'd looked back at her, meeting her eyes. His gaze had been careful, exacting, studying her for any sign of pain. After a moment, when he'd seemed to have decided that she was telling him the truth, he'd nodded and then gestured toward the nightstand. "It wouldn't hurt to take one, would it?"

"One would work," she'd agreed. "But only if I can get out of this bed."

Nick had picked up the pill, holding it between his fingers carefully, then had given her a questioning glance. "And go . . . where?"

"Anywhere. Downstairs." Natalie thought for a moment. "TV. I wanna watch TV. And I want ice-cream—pistachio, no nuts. And hot chocolate. And—"

Nick had held the pill up for closer inspection. "It's a good thing you're off these, because I think *I'm* going to need them."

That had been the first week. They'd survived it with good humor and medication, Nick carrying her until she could walk and then often scooping her off her feet and carrying her anyway when he thought she was straining herself. He'd kept her warm and fed and entertained.

By the end of the week, at such an emotional distance, she could have been in the next building instead of seated beside him on the couch. He'd been afraid to touch her, to be too close to her—-or that was how it had seemed. His fear for her had driven a wedge between them and then she'd started to succumb to the fear as well.

There was a space across the street from the Raven. Natalie roused herself from her reverie, parked the car, and took the keys with her. She should have locked it, but didn't, in too much of a hurry to get inside, to find Nick to see . . . .

She wasn't quite certain.

The Raven was lighter, brighter than when Janette had owned it, and had acquired the air of a carnival peep show somewhere along the way, with painted ladies and a low scent that spoke of sex and sleaze. She clutched her purse to her side automatically and made her way through the crowd, heading for the bar . . . until she froze when a hand grabbed her elbow.

The move was so reminiscent of Nick that she expected to see him, but found her gaze meeting that of LaCroix instead. He was wearing a black shirt buttoned high, almost to his chin, and an air of authority so thick that you would have needed a search and rescue team to find your way through to the other side. He leaned close to her ear, whispering "Not here. Someplace more private."

Despite the thunder of the music, she heard every word distinctly, as if they'd been alone in an open, empty space. Without showing any hesitation or weakness—or so she hoped—Natalie nodded her agreement. The touch of his hand on her arm seemed less insistent as he guided her through the crowd of dancers, who parted easily for him and, in turn, her. There were a few curious looks as she passed. Not that she cared.

It was apparently his office. He drew her into the darkened room, just inside the door, then left her there. A second later and a light shone above his desk. LaCroix straightened and folded his arms, regarding her with a thoughtful look as he leaned back against the desk. "He's not here."

"Isn't he?" She let just enough challenge slip into her voice.

"I have no reason to lie to you. And it's not my fault you've misplaced him, so don't take that tone of voice with me." Then LaCroix's sharp and cold attitude softened into a slight smile. "Ah, my poor, dear Natalie . . . you haven't *misplaced* him, have you? You've driven him away."

So quick, so accurate—she shivered slightly at the assessment and looked at the couch against the wall, a filing cabinet, an end table, a chair. "Yes," she admitted, after a pause. And then, "No. It was—"

"A misunderstanding?" LaCroix's voice practically oozed with sympathy and he clasped his hands together as he walked toward her. "There, you see? Didn't I warn you? Nicholas was bound to be unfaithful to you sooner or later. He has two mistresses far older and more seductive for him than you could ever be."

Mistresses? Natalie turned to face him, chin raised defiantly at his words and all too aware that her blouse revealed a bit more of her neck than she would have liked. Janette she knew about. But Janette was gone. Was there someone else—?

"Self-pity and despair," supplied LaCroix with a smile, as if he knew that she'd misread his words. He shook his head sadly. "Did you really think your love for him would keep them at bay?"

Natalie had a sudden flash of memory—Nick's face when she'd turned toward him, the resignation in his eyes. She didn't see LaCroix, couldn't see him for that instant of hurt in Nick's eyes that had then been consumed by that cold, hard mask. "Is he gone?"

"You're asking if he's left . . . what? This city? His current life? You?" LaCroix turned away. "No . . . not yet."

She took a step toward him, then another, following him as he walked over to the desk. "But he *is* planning on leaving? You know that?"

"If you're asking if he's spoken to me, no. We've only spoken twice since the . . . incident." He reached down to the desk and picked up a watch, a pocket watch, from the blotter. Flipping it open, he added, "Things have not been this strained between us for some time."

"Can you stop him from leaving?"

LaCroix snapped the watch shut, then folded his fingers closed over it. When he looked up at her, his eyes were positively cold. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Our agreement . . . ." Natalie stopped herself, meeting his gaze evenly. "No. Forget I said anything. You're right. You stayed away for a month. You did what I asked you to do. Threatening me wouldn't help either of us right now."

"How perceptive." He took a step toward her, but she stood her ground, even as he raised a hand to her face and ran his finger along the line of her jaw. "What will you do, dear Natalie? How will you keep Nicholas here? Are you willing to, as they say, put it all on the line? Is he really worth *that* much to you?"

Natalie stared into his eyes. "You tell me."

For a moment, LaCroix's finger lingered on her lips, then he drew back his hand. He carefully placed the watch on the desktop, turning from her. "You'll be certain to let me know the outcome, won't you?"

"You'll know, one way or the other."

"Yes." She saw his sly smile in profile. "I will, won't I?" But then he turned and fixed her with a warning gaze over his shoulder. "I would advise you to take care. Not for your sake, but for his. If anything happens to Nicholas—"

"Let me guess—fires of hell and all that sort of stuff?" she asked, forcing her tone to be light.

His smile was anything but amused. "You understand."

There was nothing more to say. LaCroix turned his attention from her and back to the watch on his desk blotter, his words a very abrupt dismissal. Natalie paused for a moment, fuming, but then marched to the door. She wandered her way through the crowd in the Raven, no longer protected by LaCroix's commanding presence, but her attitude made more than a few of the patrons clear a space for her as she passed.

At any other time, that would have amused her. Now, she ignored it. Her visit here hadn't been a complete failure. Nick hadn't left yet. Which meant that he was probably at the loft.

Her stomach twisted at the memory of the place. Natalie opened the car door automatically, then seated herself behind the wheel. By the end of the first week at the loft, things had changed between them.

Nick had gone back to work by then and she'd found herself falling into a pattern that she'd grown used to during her night work shifts, her body clock adjusting so that she could sleep through the day. She'd watched television and tapes, listened to the radio—pointedly ignoring the Nightcrawler's broadcast and wishing that she could effectively scratch that marking from the dial on Nick's stereo—perused Nick's bookshelves for something to read, until he realized what she was doing and offered to pick up something more to her taste . . . and was generally bored.

It had been three days into the second week when he'd returned to visit her on his dinner break, as he'd done the two days before that. She'd been stretched on the couch wearing a pair of overly comfortable sweats and skimming a book on some long-ago Franco-Breton conflict, trying to determine whether Nick read about the history he'd lived through simply to get a better overall picture or because it amused him when historians blundered so badly about great movements and epic changes which Nick had understood as a series of misunderstandings, hot tempers, and bloated egos.

Natalie had peeked over the edge of the couch as he'd entered, then shifted herself to a sitting position. She'd folded her arms and rested her chin against the leather, watching him. "You're late."

"Work got a little busy."

His hair had been ruffled and his jacket askew; he'd been holding a brown paper bag awkwardly in the crook of his right arm. Despite the wonderful odors of Chinese cooking that wafted from it, Natalie had risen carefully from the couch—some sudden movements had still caused her pain—and had walked toward Nick as he'd placed the paper bag on the table.

"Hope you don't mind Chinese," he'd said lightly. "I was in the neighborhood and thought you might enjoy a change."

"In the neighborhood, hmn?" Natalie had continued to ignore the bag, concentrating on the way his jacket had been thrown slightly off his shoulders. She'd reached out a hand to adjust it before he'd realized what she was doing . . . and saw the blood stain and hole that he'd been trying to hide. She'd looked up at him— Nick had merely grinned, almost guiltily. "It's nothing. Small caliber. You can take care of it after you eat."

"I can take care of it *now*," she'd informed him sharply. Pulling out a chair from the table, she'd pointed to it and said, "Sit!" then turned and headed toward the staircase.

Nick had been there before her. "You're not supposed to be going up there—"

Hands on her hips, Natalie had stared at him, suddenly angry that he was being so protective, that he was fool enough to get himself shot, that he was a vampire and thank God that he was or that bullet might have punctured a lung and she'd have gotten a call that he was in emergency or dead or . . . .

"I've been up there three times tonight," was the best she could manage.

"Then that's three times too many." Nick had taken her arm and tried to lead her to the chair she'd pulled from the table for him. "You know what Dr. Corey said—no exertion—"

"It's not like she knew you were going to get shot." Natalie had wrenched herself free of his grip, turned toward him—and that sudden anger evaporated when she saw the hole in the shirt again. "Stand still," she'd ordered, then she'd pushed aside his jacket and begun to unbutton his shirt.

Nick *hadn't* stood still. He'd moved back a step as soon as her fingers touched his shirt buttons. She'd been startled by the sudden movement, by the desperate look in his eyes. And then he'd stepped forward again to catch her hands in his, whispered, "I'll get the bandages," and had been gone before she'd been able to blink.

She'd clenched her fists, forced herself to be calm—he *knew* she hated that—and had seated herself on the chair at the table. Fists resting on the tabletop, Natalie had forced her fingers to unclench, resting her palms flat on the table. The glossy darkness of the table top had made her reflection dark and distorted. It had been hard not to think, not to react, but she'd centered on that nothingness during the time it took him to return.

Ten minutes. Ten minutes to get a roll of bandages and scissors and antiseptic from the bag he'd retrieved from her car last week, when she'd finally convinced him that she'd felt naked and vulnerable without it.

Nick had placed the items on the table silently, almost directly into her

hands. The balled up gauze rolled across the table and she caught it—just as his hand reached it, too. She'd looked up at him when their hands had touched . . . .

And he'd pulled his hand away. Slowly.

"You'd better have a seat," she'd warned him. "This may sting a little."

If she'd expected some witty comment, or any comment at all, she'd have been disappointed. The silence was almost frightening as Nick pulled up a chair beside her own. He'd already unbuttoned his shirt—his jacket having been disposed of somewhere upstairs, or so she'd gathered—and slipped one arm from the sleeve so that she had access to the left side of his rib cage.

She'd gotten used to fishing bullets out of him. Over the years, she'd made a careful notation of the different sessions; there were times when he'd felt pain and others when there was no sensation at all. This one had seemed to be the latter, because Nick had merely stared at the far wall as she'd worked, with not even a flicker of an eyelash as she carefully sliced the skin around the wound with a sterilized scalpel in an attempt to find the bullet.

"So," he'd said, in a very ordinary, conversational tone, "how has *your* evening been?"

"About the same. I read. I recuperated." The blade had contacted the metal casing of the bullet and she blindly found then picked up the sterilized incision forceps she had on the table as she'd kept her eyes on the wound. "If I'd known you were going to get shot, I could have spent some time getting my stuff ready."

"I didn't know I was going to get shot."

"Well, that's your excuse for not calling ahead, then." Biting her lip, Natalie had carefully withdrawn the bullet from the wound and dropped it onto the sterilized pad she'd placed on the table. The wound itself hadn't needed any stitching—Nick's wounds seldom did—and once the foreign object had been removed she could almost see the cells begin to regenerate. In two hours time the wound would be nothing more than a memory . . . but she'd swabbed the area with antiseptic and placed a bandage over it anyway, erring on the side of caution.

When she'd looked up, she'd found that Nick had picked up the bloody bullet between his thumb and forefinger, eyeing it carefully. Her hands were still gloved so she plucked it from between his fingers. "Give me that."

"It's evidence."

"And where are you going to say it came from?" When he looked away, she picked up a plastic bag and opened it, then slipped the bullet inside. "I can give you a Forensics run on it when I get back. I'm guessing this guy took a couple of shots at you—?"

"A woman, actually."

"Really?" She'd raised her eyebrows as she swept the soiled disposable items together into a large piece of plastic and walked over to his wastebasket, shedding her gloves in the process. "Equal opportunity gunman. Or is that gun 'person' now?" Before he could answer, she'd returned to the table and gathered her used instruments together on a larger piece of gauze. "In any case, you can probably dig another shell out of a wall somewhere as a cover. Try not to get shot again until I can get these sterilized, okay?"

"Nat?" He'd caught her arm when she'd turned to move away. "What have I done?"

She'd hesitated, dropped the instruments back on the table when she'd decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, then sat down on the chair beside his. "You didn't call." Somehow, she'd managed to look up at him, to meet that earnest—but somehow distant—gaze. "I could have had this stuff ready. A bullet's nothing to you now, but if you become mortal you're going to have to get used to . . . ." Her voice trailed off as he turned his head. "What?"

"Nothing."

"'Nothing,' my ass!" Natalie had leaned forward, placed her hand on his thigh—

She'd felt his leg tense beneath her touch. In fact, his body had seemed to freeze and the room was unnaturally still for an instant. Natalie had lifted her hand from him and rested it on her lap, staring down at it as if it had betrayed her.

"*If*," he said, almost spitting the word. "*If* I become mortal . . . not *when*?" Nick had risen to his feet and taken a step away, his back toward her.

"I meant *when*," she'd said quickly. "It was a slip." Natalie had placed a hand on the table, all but pushing herself upright. "Nick, I didn't mean—"

His back had straightened, stiffened . . . then his head bowed, turning slightly. She'd followed his gaze to the refrigerator, where he kept the cow blood that he drank. That he'd been trying *not* to drink, since she'd been here.

No matter how hard he'd tried to hide it, she'd noticed. Sometimes it was the desperation in his voice, a hint of weariness that couldn't be ascribed to the distance she felt growing between them. A part of her had wanted to walk over to the refrigerator and snatch the bottle from the shelf and hand it to him, demanding that he drink it. But another part of her had known that it would only defeat what they were trying to accomplish.

By the time she'd looked back to him, he'd slipped his arm back into his shirt and had been fastening the buttons. He'd walked the long way around the room and the couch was between them. "I've gotta get back—we've got a perp in holding and I told Tracy to keep him on ice."

His voice had been so normal, then . . . as if he'd been speaking to a stranger. Natalie had turned, her hand still pressing down against the table, knowing that it would support her. Nick had approached her, the slightest smile on his features. "Thanks for the patch-up."

She'd closed her eyes as he'd kissed her forehead lightly and had found that she couldn't open them, even as she heard him walk to the elevator. "You'll be back—?"

"Before sunrise," he'd called, in a light tone of voice.

"Don't cut it so—" She'd heard the elevator door bang closed and opened her eyes. "—Close."

That had been one of their better nights. She'd tried to slip away from the loft without his knowing twice before she'd finally succeeded in convincing him that it was time she went home. Then it had become a matter of ignoring his phone calls, avoiding him at work. Cruel, but compassionate, she'd decided. She couldn't deal with him. Not yet. Not now.

But if she couldn't deal with Nick now, she'd lose him . . . forever.

Natalie parked beside the Caddie. She turned the engine off, then sat there for a long moment, looking up at the lights in the windows. She wasn't really certain she could do this. There was still time to turn around and go home, to give up, to save what was left of her sanity and her life. If she played her cards right, in three years she could be married with a house and a yard for Sydney to play in, a baby on the way and a husband who worked nine to five (AM to PM) and . . . .

God, just the *thought* of it scared the hell out of her.

Pulling the keys from the ignition, Natalie decided that there was no use putting it off any longer. As it was, she'd probably pushed her luck.

He hadn't changed the access codes and by the time she pushed aside the elevator door and walked into the loft, she'd only thought about turning tail and running four or five more times. A quick glance around the room was cheering—there weren't any dustcloths to be seen yet. Although he could be in a such a hurry that he wasn't planning to bother with them.

A noise from the second floor caught her attention. She turned and found him leaning against the upstairs railing by the bedroom door, watching her. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a cotton shirt that had soft blue stripes running through it. His expression was . . . guilty, but that was covered up quickly enough by that very proper, emotionless mask.

"Thought I'd say good-bye." Natalie tossed her purse to the couch and pushed her hair back from her face as she walked toward the staircase. "See if I could help you with anything."

There was hesitation on his part—surprise at being caught out? Or that she was being so helpful? Natalie didn't bother to guess but tried to match his mask.

It worked. Something in him seemed to ease. Nick nodded, as if to himself, then headed down the stairs toward her. "I think I've got everything taken care of. I'll send for the rest later on."

"Oh. Well, if you need something packed, I'll take care of it. You know how movers break things." He'd reached the lower landing. Natalie met his gaze with a slight smile. "And . . . I guess there's one more thing."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Your promise." When he simply stared, she smiled. "You promised to make love to me one more time before you left."

Nick swallowed and looked away. "I didn't promise—"

"Yes, you did."

"It wasn't a promise. I said—"

"You said—" Natalie took a step toward him and placed her palm on his cheek, turning his face toward her. "You said—"

He caught her hand in his and touched her palm to his lips. "I said that if that happened, I'd never be able to leave you." For a long moment, Nick held her hand in his, staring down at it, his thumb lightly caressing the back of her hand. "We can't."

Dropping her hand, he walked around her, toward the windows. Natalie took a deep breath, but refused to move. "We *can*. We've made it work. We've *proven* it will work."

There was pain in his voice as he stopped at the window and leaned his hand against it. "You can't call that 'making love.'"

Natalie hesitated, biting back her immediate response. "Oh . . . no? Granted, there was a certain amount of 'animal' lust involved, but I thought, I *felt* there was something more." Tears threatened at the corners of her eyes; she wiped her lips with her fingers and cleared her throat aloud. "But if that's what *you* think, that's all it was to you—" She couldn't finish, even as he looked at her with guilt-stricken eyes. Heading for the elevator at a quick walk, she said, "Have a nice life, Nick."

"Nat—no." He was there before her, folding his arms around her and holding her tightly. "No. That wasn't all it was. You know that." He pulled back from her just enough to look into her eyes, to reassure himself. "You *know* that."

She fought hard not to respond to his embrace, not to give comfort where no comfort could be expected in return, but it was that desperation in his gaze that battered down all the lies she knew how to tell herself to save herself pain. "I know."

"I hurt you." He pulled her close. "Nat, if I stay, I'll only hurt you again."

She placed an arm against his shoulder and locked her elbow in place, holding him at arm's length. Natalie met his eyes and said evenly, "If you want to leave, I can't stop you. That's your choice. But don't lie to yourself about it. And don't lie to me. Don't you think I deserve better than that?"

Nick pulled back from her slightly, his hands resting on her shoulders. "I'm not lying. I don't want to hurt you again."

"I know that." Her smile was sad as she brushed the corner of his mouth with her fingertips. "Maybe I got hurt, but you got hurt, too. We hurt each other. That's something we have to deal with."

His jaw tightened and his hands dropped from her shoulders as he walked away from her, toward the window again. "I'm fine."

She saw it then when he walked away—a way to get past her own fear, her own terrors. If she concentrated on him, helped him sort out his demons, maybe it would be enough to help her face her own. It was so obvious a solution and she railed at herself for not having seen it earlier.

Then again, she *was* here. Maybe she'd known the answer all along and didn't dare admit it to herself because if she'd thought about it, she would have run screaming into the night.

All in all, Natalie decided, her subconscious was *damned* clever. Perhaps dangerously so.

"Fine?" she echoed, letting him hear the incredulity in her voice. "I pulled a bullet out of you and you couldn't bear being touched."

"You flinched, at your apartment."

There was a note of petulance in his voice. Natalie walked over toward him, careful to keep her distance physically, if not emotionally. "Yeah. I did. I'm sorry. I didn't think I was ready to deal with it, to deal with you, yet." His gaze moved from the window to meet her own—that mask was back in place and it almost broke her heart. "Damn it, don't you shut me out! I made a mistake, okay? I should have told you what was happening with me, what was going on. I thought I could handle it. I couldn't. And I don't think you can, either."

He swallowed again and, for an instant, that carefully controlled expression faltered. The weakness was minor—another second and the mask returned, this time his tone of voice was cold as well. "I'm fine. I've healed."

"Physically, yes. A hell of a lot faster than I did." She took a step toward him, then another when he didn't turn or walk away. "But if you leave now, like this, it's going to be a long time before the rest of you heals." Natalie reached out to take his hand in her own, folded his fingers through hers. "It's all right if you don't love me. I can understand that. What I did was stupid—"

His fingers tightened around her own. "Nat—"

"I made a deal with LaCroix and I never gave you a choice. *I* made the decision. It's my fault."

It was when her voice broke that he drew her closer into his embrace. He rested her head on his shoulder and she felt the pressure of his hand against her hair. "I don't blame you. And you can't blame yourself. It's *not* your fault. We've been through this—it's LaCroix. He did this to us." His words whispered against her ear. "I won't let him win. I won't let him make me hurt you again."

"Then he wins either way, doesn't he?" She pulled back to see his face. "If you stay, you're afraid that you'll hurt me. If you leave, you *will* hurt me . . . and hurt yourself. Either way, he gets what he wants—he tears us apart."

Nick closed his eyes. "He always wins, Nat."

"Well, not this time." When Nick's eyes opened at the vehemence in her voice, Natalie knew she was on the right track. "You don't know why he did this to us, do you?"

Wrong question—that carefully blank expression returned. "Because I told him what we were doing; I threw it in his face—"

"No. No, not that." Natalie reached up to press her hand against his cheek. "No, that's not all. Nick—he didn't believe you. Because . . . well, because what we did shouldn't have happened."

"Of *course* it shouldn't have happened." He released her and pushed her back slightly, so that he could walk away. "I shouldn't have let it get that far. I knew the risks—Nat, I could have killed you at any time. Those chains would never have held me—"

She followed him, hurried after so that she could grab his shoulder and turn him toward her. "No—listen! Forget about the chains. Forget about everything except *us*. We made love. A mortal and a vampire made love . . . but you didn't bite me. You *climaxed*, but you didn't bite me." She watched his eyes, hoping that it was sinking in. "Paula said that's not supposed to happen."

He stared at her as the words began to make sense, then looked away, nodding thoughtfully. Nick fell back onto the couch, lowering himself down to the seat with one hand. "She's right. It *shouldn't* happen. That's why I was surprised the first time . . . ."

It was Natalie's turn to feel her way down to the seat of the couch. She suddenly realized exactly what *had* happened that first time—Nick had tried to please her, all the while expecting absolutely no release for himself. Just the thought of it made her want to cry.

But she closed her eyes and fought back those tears, instead forcing her voice to an even tone as she said, "He wanted proof. That's what LaCroix told me—he didn't believe you. I think—I think he thought you were lying."

"Lying?"

The catch in his voice startled her—Natalie's eyes opened and she met his gaze. If anything, Nick's crooked smile alarmed her even more. "Nick?"

"He put us through that—put *you* through that—because he thought I was *lying*?"

There was a note of barely controlled anger in his tone. She reached over and grabbed his hand, which was resting on the back of the couch. "Hey, can you blame him? The only reason Paula believed me was because she saw the evidence for herself. She said—" Natalie took a deep breath and made herself hold his gaze. "She asked me what I'd been doing to your blood chemistry. She said that you're . . . different. That your body isn't behaving the way a vampire's body should."

Nick's fingers tightened over her own. "You mean . . . it's working? I'm becoming mortal?"

There was such hope and, at the same time, incredulity in his voice—she couldn't deal with the contradiction and wondered how on earth she should answer, settling on the truth only after a moment's reflection. "I don't know. Paula thought that if you went back to human blood, it might go away. We're doing *something* right. At least, I *think* it's right. I don't know. I can't be sure. But it's possible—" Natalie wasn't ready for it, wasn't prepared for him slipping closer to her on the couch, wrapping his arms around her, and kissing her.

Not that she minded. It was a long, slow kiss, with no malice aforethought. It sucked the wind right out of her lungs, along with her tonsils, and when Nick's lips finally parted from her own for more than a second at a time, she was feeling decidedly light-headed from a lack of oxygen.

He was raining kisses down the side of her neck when reality kicked in. Grabbing his shoulder tightly with one hand, she pushed him back against the upper cushions of the couch with the gentlest of pressures. "We have . . . we have to take this slow," she said breathlessly. "We don't *know*—"

"*I* know." He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, grazing the skin with his teeth.

It sent a shiver through her . . . and not a sign of hesitancy or revulsion on her own part, she was happy to note. That led to another kiss and Nick's fingers fumbling with the buttons on her blouse. When she tried to help him, he brushed her hands aside, so that she started to work on the buttons on his shirt, instead. Then his hands were beneath the cloth, stroking her breasts through her bra, squeezing the flesh lightly between his fingers so that she moaned even in the midst of a kiss, breathing into his mouth.

Her hands explored as well—his chest muscles beneath his T-shirt. There were lines to draw against his skin through the light fabric and the barest scratch of her fingernails against his flesh made his nipples harden.

Then his mouth left her own and his hands caught her fingers. Nick sat back, pulling away from her. "Nat—the chains . . . I couldn't sleep with them in the bedroom. They're gone. We can't—"

"We *can*." She leaned forward, her fingers interlacing behind his head as she pulled him into another kiss.

But Nick disengaged quickly, his breathing ragged as he turned away from her, as if to free himself from temptation. "We *can't*, *I* can't. There aren't any chains. And even if there were—I couldn't do that again."

Natalie tried to regulate her breath, to will away the flush of warmth that had spread throughout her body.

It didn't work.

Concentrating on Nick helped, especially noting the lines of misery that he tried to hide from her when he leaned forward and rested his face in his hands. She could see the tightness in his shoulders through his shirt.

Of course he'd gotten rid of the chains and manacles—she hadn't remembered seeing them when she was convalescing. He'd probably had the good sense to dispose of them when she was out cold, under medication.

Not that they'd do much good. The chains had broken once, which meant they could break again—Nick wasn't about to make any allowance for the fact that he'd thought LaCroix was about to kill her when he'd summoned the superhuman effort needed to free himself from those restraints. They wouldn't work; he didn't trust them anymore.

The question was, would he trust *her*?

And just how far could she trust *him*?

Time to act, not to think, to take comfort where comfort could and would be found. He wouldn't deny her that much. And so Natalie moved close to him and placed a hand tentatively on his shoulder as she asked, "Hold me?"

It took Nick a second to respond, to rouse from the latest pit of despair into which he'd thrown himself and their chances for any happiness. He leaned back against the couch and folded his arms around her as she rested her head on his chest. His right hand was on her hair—a steady pressure that fell into a stroking pattern when he leaned his chin against the top of her head.

It was comfortable, being surrounded by the scent of his aftershave, his hand in her hair, his cool flesh beneath her hand. Natalie felt his heart beat—a sound so old and empty that the echo of it seemed to rumble through his

chest as if in memory. Her own blouse was open and the apartment was cooler than it had been while she'd been convalescing there, so she wasn't sure whether the temperature or having him so near accounted for the hardening of her nipples. There was always the possibility that the plan forming in her mind was also causing that outward reaction—

He was interested—the fact that Nick had lowered his head and was burying his face in her hair at the moment was a clear sign. But he was afraid. And why not? The last time they'd been together, he'd been treated brutally. She had to deal with that as soon as possible, because if she left it up to him, he'd spend what remained of his existence as a sexually-battered, frustrated, and ill-tempered vampire. She couldn't do that to him. She couldn't do that to the rest of the world.

So she splayed her fingers lightly across his chest. When that didn't seem to provoke a reaction, she let the hand move lower, caressing his skin through the T-shirt carefully, until she reached the noticeable bulge at the crotch of his jeans.

'Reaction' would have been too delicate a word. At only her touch, Nick went absolutely still. She was certain that if his heart had been beating more frequently, it would have stopped. "Nat—?" he whispered hesitantly against her ear. "What—?"

"Sssh." She waited until he raised his head and met her gaze. "I'm taking care of you," she said softly. Then she leaned forward to kiss him.

She'd begun to learn the language of his responses to her and now was the time to put her past lessons into practice. The kiss was careful and cherishing, more maintenance and remembrance than the passionate foreplay he'd backed away from a few moments ago. This kiss was to let him know that he was loved, that she'd take care of him, and even leave him alone if that's what he really wanted.

Nick's response wasn't in the least ambiguous—he didn't want to be left alone. As she continued to stroke the denim, she felt him relax slightly, some of that sudden tension easing from him. This much he could handle. Which meant that it might be time to move things along a little.

Natalie raised her hand to his belt buckle and very carefully began to loosen the clasp. His breathing became a little more ragged, but he continued to kiss her, allowing her to take the lead in this. It wasn't until she actually undid the buckle, unbuttoned the top button of his fly, and began to undo the zipper that he stopped again.

Nick's eyes were closed—she saw that much before he leaned his head against her own, taking a deep breath and releasing it against the open collar of her blouse. "Nat—"

A warning. A worry. But it was the fear she heard from his tone that strengthened her resolve. She reached inside his jeans and his briefs to touch him. Only her fingertips at first, her touch feather-light, but then she grew bold enough to rest her palm against his shaft, cupping it in her hand.

Nick shuddered against her, his arms still around her even though she was the one comforting him. With each subtle stroking touch of her fingers she felt his shaft harden. It seemed as if one tension relieved the other—she could feel some of the fear burning from him, consumed by his increasing lust. His fingers entwined even more tightly within her hair as she wrapped her fist around him and added a light pressure to her movements.

Nick's arms tightened around her—not so tight that she felt uncomfortable and couldn't breath, but a small flicker of fear swept through her at the realization that he might not be in enough control of himself to notice the difference between the two. She kissed his cheek, his neck, his shoulder . . . all that she could reach of him as he hid his face within her hair. She heard him moan, heard his heart beat twice in less than eleven minutes, and fought back her own small terrors, locking them away with the knowledge that this was the right thing for him.

Then his hand moved from her shoulder. He caught her wrist in a tight grip, stopping the movement even as she stroked the length of him.

"I want you," he whispered, his voice rough-edged and deep. "I want you so badly . . . and I can't have you."

Natalie released his shaft, turning her hand to intertwine her fingers with his. Nick pulled back from her to face her, to look into her eyes, his own blue and so very sad. He darted forward suddenly and kissed her, the crush of his lips against her own telling her just how high his passion had risen, the play of his tongue in her mouth speaking volumes about the depths of his desires.

Cupping his face with her hands, she gently drew back from the kiss, careful not to give him any indication that she might be rejecting him. "You—" Her own voice abandoned her, lost in the sensations that were awakening within her as she'd tended to his arousal. "You *can* have me."

Again, the sad eyes, an even sadder smile as he reached up with his fingers to trace the line of her nose, the side of her mouth. "No chains."

"We don't need them." She planted a quick kiss against his lips, her hands remaining on either side of his face. "You can do this. *We* can do this."

His eyes closed and Nick leaned his forehead against her own. "I'll kill you."

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

With a heart-felt sigh, he pulled back from her and placed his hands over her own, pulling them from his face and grasping them tightly. "Nat—"

"Okay. Okay." She grinned—couldn't have done anything but for that moment, when he grinned as well—then sobered when she saw the light in his eyes dim and his smile fade. "We *can* do this. Just . . . just don't bite me."

"Don't . . . bite you." He nodded once, as if trying to give the idea the consideration it deserved, then looked away from her. "Can't be done."

"It *can*." She squeezed his fingers hard, making him meet her gaze again. "*You* can."

"It's never been done," Nick explained, his voice taking on a long-suffering tone. "I've never heard—"

"Just because you've never heard of it happening before doesn't mean it can't be done. Right?" When he looked away from her again, she leaned forward and butted her head against his chest. "Nick! Come on! I told you—Paula said we're unique. Even if no vampire has managed to do this before, you can . . . not that I think no one's done it. You guys aren't all that hot on sharing information, especially *that* kind of information." When he looked back at her, she saw some small fissures in that obstinate, absolute conviction that they were doomed. It was as if her words had begun to break his resolve, given him some hope. "Besides," she whispered, pulling her hand from his and sliding it down the length of his chest, "we've done something we shouldn't have been able to do—according to Paula. We've just bucked thousands of years of vampire experience. We've done the impossible."

His eyes met hers, searching, as if for some fault or flaw. "You trust me too much."

"I love you too much," she responded, expression serious, even as her hand moved to the opening of his jeans. "It's risky. I know that. But we've made it this far. We've done something that your friends say can't be done." She reached inside his jeans and briefs, running her fingers over his softening erection. Nick shivered noticeably, but his gaze remained locked with her own. "We've made history. Why else would LaCroix—?"

Nick lowered his hand and removed hers from the inside of his jeans. "Do me a favor," he whispered. "When you're doing that—don't mention his name."

"Sorry."

Her light tone let him know that she wasn't all that contrite, but that she understood. Nick leaned forward to kiss her lightly—a brief touch of lips to lips—and his fingers intertwined with her own again. His eyes were shadowed, somewhat sad, as he asked, "Are you sure?"

There was only one answer to that. "I love you."

His lips touched her own again, but less chastely. Mouth met mouth, tongues played, and she wrapped her arms around his neck to hold him to her. It was only as Nick kissed her cheek and began to trail kisses through her hair, pausing to nibble at her ear, that Natalie realized she hadn't thought this far ahead. What if he couldn't do it? What if Nick couldn't break the biological imperative, separate himself from the vampire instinct to feed and procreate through blood? What would she do? What *could* she do?

Closing her eyes, she shuddered as a memory of their last time together smothered her senses—feeling filled by him, but the pain of that *thing* as it scraped her raw while simultaneously digging those sharpened barbs into his shaft . . . .

Her fingers dug into the flesh of Nick's arms and she buried her head in his shoulder, trying to silence the small, frightened whimper that rose from within her. Even as he tried to pull away from her, she held him tightly, forcing herself to acknowledge the fact that she wanted him now, desperately. That the fear could be overcome. That she could *not* hurt him this time. That their first time together he'd agreed to her experiment because he wanted to please her, that he'd intended for her to take her pleasure from him and believed he'd be left frustrated.

Nick's hand stroked her hair and he whispered soothing sounds in her ear as he held her, rocking back and forth slightly. She closed her eyes and reveled in the closeness of him, in the pressure and security of his embrace. This was more than she'd ever thought she'd have again. Couldn't this be enough?

Despite the fears for himself and for her, despite the memories that gnawed at her to give up and surrender to the realization that what she really wanted was unattainable, some small and quiet part within her couldn't stand the lies. It answered, 'No,' in a whisper.

She knew that she would be strong enough for this, even if she couldn't be strong enough for both of them any longer. Just as she knew that if it didn't happen now, it would never happen again.

When she opened her eyes, she found that Nick was watching her, concerned. "We don't have to do this," he said softly—and she could see him recognize the lie behind his words.

"I need this." Natalie swallowed, able only to deal with the honesty of it. "I want this. I want *you*."

He kissed her again with tenderness—yes, she definitely liked that cherishing kiss most of all, because even though it lacked the toe-curling, spine-tingling force of full passion, it warmed places in her soul that passion could never reach. This *was* the right thing for them. Nothing that felt this right could be wrong.

The kiss changed, deepened into a hungry exploration. Her body pressed along his even though they still remained seated. Nick's kisses left her lips,

drifting to her chin, then down along her throat to her chest. There was an audible 'snap' as the front of her bra was torn and she felt the chill of the air on her flesh just before the touch of his fingers dancing across her skin. There was a pause when he discovered the slight scar on her left breast beside the nipple, where he'd pierced her. Then he began to kiss and suck and pinch and caress in earnest, as if trying to erase the mark and the memory of it from her flesh.

Natalie moaned in answer, kissing his hair, even as her hands felt his chest through his T-shirt. Running her fingernails across his nipples sent a shudder through him and he groaned against the flesh of her breast as she played with him. When her hands traveled further, grasping the waistband of his jeans to push them down, Nick rose slightly, pulling his knees beneath him but not missing a beat as he caressed her breasts and nipples with his lips and fingers. By touch alone, she eased his jeans over the smooth skin of his thighs and his briefs went with them. Her left hand cupped his scrotum, warming him, and rubbing the sacs gently, while her right found his shaft. She'd stroked him to a near-erection before and now he was responding quickly, almost desperately, rising firm and shivering at her touch.

Nick's fingers slipped just inside the waistband of her skirt. For a second she considered helping him, but then he reached around the back to find the zipper. The cloth drifted down over her hips and fell to her knees, her pantyhose and underwear following. His hands were cool against her skin, sliding over her backside, cupping her flesh and pulling her against him tightly as their mouths met in another kiss.

The force of it was frightening, a desperate intensity that both terrified and excited her. Natalie's hands rose to his shoulders and she clasped her fingers together behind his neck, needing to find some connection to reality despite the heady swirl of sensations that engulfed her. She felt Nick's hand slide beneath her, his fingers stroking and caressing her so that she panted against his lips, kissing and breathing mingling together, one reluctantly giving way to the other in turn.

It was when she felt his finger enter her that a sudden chill stole over her, a stillness that dampened her ardor like a bone-drenching November rain. She tensed against and around him. He withdrew his invasion just as quickly and she ducked her head to pull herself closer against him

It was completely understandable, considering what had been done to her. A mental review brought up all sorts of information about dealing with victims of rape and sexual trauma. She knew the questions to be asked and how to ask them, the samples to be taken and how they should be labeled. She knew who to talk to, where information should be sent, what procedures should be done. She knew a half dozen counseling and crisis center numbers.

"Nat?"

Natalie told herself that she wouldn't cry. A few tears gathered and she squeezed her eyes even more tightly closed in an attempt to cut them off. The concern in his voice, though, nearly did her in.

"Just give me . . . a second," she managed, swallowing hard in mid-sentence when the tears threatened again.

"It's all right—"

"No. I *can* do this," she said sharply. Then, as his arms encircled her tightly, repeated to herself in a quieter, shakier voice, "I can do this."

She knew this was too soon. She needed counseling. She needed hand-holding and caressing and care-taking that didn't involve the pressure of intercourse. Intercourse, hell! Having intercourse with a vampire who was worried about ripping her throat out was way beyond 'pressure.' She was in this so deep she'd need time in a decompression chamber before her equilibrium ever returned.

She wanted him. She wanted him desperately. The touch of him, the scent of him engulfing her, was enough to stir some warmth to life inside her. But the fear was what worried at her, putting out the fires as soon as they'd begun. In theory it was easy enough to handle, but the reality of that one finger entering her, of finding her so taut and tense and *tight* had brought everything down to basic physicality.

She knew the right word—discomfort. There would be some 'discomfort.' She'd torn a few things last time, enough for Paula to have sewn her up in two spots. It would heal, that's what Paula had told her. No permanent damage. Maybe a little tightness her first time out of the box, what with the internal scarring, the sensitivity of the membrane and tissue and muscles that had been bruised, abused, and battered. Minor *discomfort*.

Nick shifted, but she held onto him tighter, warning, "If you let me go, I'll never speak to you again."

"I won't hurt you."

"I'm not hurt. I'm scared. There's a big difference." The little voice inside her called her a liar, but she shushed at it and told it to go away. Natalie raised her head to look at him and met his eyes, which were worried and guilty. "I want you. I want this. I just need a second." She raised a hand to his face when she saw the scowl start to form. "Just . . . love me."

There were tears at the corners of her eyes again. Nick hesitated, then brushed them away with his fingertips. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. "So amazingly beautiful."

He knew how to cherish with his words, as well as his kisses. His fingertips ran down her arms, her blouse having been tossed away at some point, and he divested her of the remnants of her bra. He held her breasts in the palms of his hands as he kissed her, fingers splayed and gently teasing. He spoke with warmth and tenderness, with softness, in breaths between kisses, the sounds whispering across her flesh.

The sense of them was less important than the sound and the intent. His words alone could have done such things to her, but his caresses and the touch of his lips drove back many of the cold and shadowy fears that had settled over her. She felt warmed by him, comforted and then excited, as his kisses grew more passionate, his touch more forceful even as it remained gentle.

Natalie yielded to the insistent pressure on her shoulders and Nick pressed her backward, against the cushions of the couch. He drew her skirt from around her knees and threw it aside, then drew off the rest of her hose, his fingers trailing down her calves and ankles, then massaging the soles of each foot. She rested her hands behind her head for a moment, watching him as he stepped to the floor and let his jeans and briefs fall away. His shirt followed and then his T-shirt beneath that.

He stood there, looking down at her with an expression that alternated between awe and concern. Finally, he offered his hand to her. "We'd have more room upstairs—?"

That cold feeling stole through her at the memory of the bedroom and what had occurred there. Natalie shook her head slightly and took his hand, pulling him to sit on the couch beside her. "No. We'll have plenty of room here."

He seemed unconvinced but sat down on the cushion beside her. Suddenly, Nick started. "Almost forgot." He leaned down and picked up his jeans. After rummaging in a pocket for a minute, he withdrew a small foil packet that she recognized as a condom.

Natalie couldn't help but laugh at his look of pride. "You've been carrying one of those around with you?"

The look of pride turned to a guilty smile. "It's been my good luck charm." He tore the package carefully, tossed it aside, then held the condom between his thumb and forefinger.

There was something in the way he looked at it, a reflective expression that she found charming and, at the same time, distressing. "Nick?"

"Just thinking." He held up the condom for her inspection and added, "And I *can* do this myself."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

His shaft was semi-erect, still hard from her latest attentions. He addressed the problem with such a look of serious concentration that she wanted to laugh—but her smile faded when she realized that he had his own problems to deal with. She wondered if it might be better if she looked away, but she wanted to see him, needed to make sure that he was going to be all right with this. And, once the condom was in place, his mood seemed to lighten somewhat . . . but only until he turned his attention back to her.

His hand rested on her cheek for a moment, then cupped her face. "If you have any second thoughts, about us . . . ."

"No second thoughts." She took his hand between her own and touched it to her lips. "No regrets. I trust you. I love you."

"No more than I love you."

Nick leaned down to kiss her and she could feel his hand shake in her grasp. It actually made her more at ease, knowing that he was nervous about this. This was like the first time between them all over again, but now there seemed so much more at stake, so much more danger involved. The chains had freed them, to some extent. Now it was fear that they had to break and escape.

One kiss and another, they followed with pauses for breath in between. His fingers on her breasts and nipples ignited the feelings that his touch had stirred before and that she'd thought her fear had quelled. Each caress built upon the sensations stirred by the one before, until his head moved lower and his mouth continued what his deft fingers had begun. They, in turn, danced along her ribs, stroked the length of her thighs, then found their way to more sensitive areas.

Again, Natalie wound her fingers in his hair, gasping as Nick played her with a touch as delicate as she'd seen him use on the piano when drifting through a Chopin waltz . . . and with just as much confidence and command. More, perhaps, now that he'd had some experience with her, because there was no false start or error in his movements. If he'd taken notes before, they'd remained engraved in his heart and fingers. She moaned beneath the soft and studied siege of her senses.

If anything, her response seemed to make him bolder—he grazed her breast with his teeth, pressed his fingers into her flesh with such force that she bucked and cried aloud at the sudden bursts of pleasure that sang through her. Then she looked up to find him kneeling between her legs, poised to enter her.

The sudden realization that penetration was imminent sent a chill through her. Natalie shuddered involuntarily and closed her eyes. Discomfort, that was it. Minor discomfort.

"Look at me," said Nick, his voice quiet. "Nat, look at me. I won't hurt you. You know I won't hurt you."

It wasn't hypnosis that he was using, but compassion. Opening her eyes, she met his gaze and smiled, his arm reaching up so that the fingers on his left hand intertwined with her own. He positioned himself to enter her with his right, looked down to make certain, then began to press against her.

She nearly panicked at the first short, stab of pain—for a second she forgot to breathe. Nick stopped instantly, his gaze meeting and staying with her own. But the feeling subsided almost at once and, after a few alternately deep and shallow breaths, she nodded.

He entered her slowly. It might have been her imagination but she felt the motion within her, pushing forward an inch at a time, his movements careful. There was a little pain, but it wasn't the tearing and scraping of their last encounter. She felt herself adjusting to accommodate him, twinges striking her every few seconds as he rubbed against a scarred area or stretched something that had tightened when she'd healed. Her head fell back against the couch cushions and she forgot to hold her breath as she panted, enjoying the luxury and frustration of his seemingly interminable entry. Then she realized that his shaft was completely inside her, to the hilt.

Nick leaned forward, placing his hands to either side of her, and kissed her slowly and deeply. There were tears at the corners of her eyes, relief and joy combined, and he kissed away those as well. He began to withdraw from her just as slowly as he'd entered, until only the tip of his shaft rested within her. Coherence wasn't a real possibility any longer—she murmured something, pleading with him to keep going, that she was all right. That's when he began to thrust in earnest. His strokes alternated between fast and slow, but it didn't seem to matter. At some point she rode a wave of sensation to its crest . . . and didn't come down, no matter how he varied his technique or rhythm.

Shudders traveled through her, leaving her muscles limp and unresponsive, until a second wave surprised her. If he was still thrusting into her, she was only dimly aware of the sensation, her mind overcome by the bliss experienced by her body. Muscles contracted, relaxed and contracted again and she really didn't care. This was what she'd missed when he'd been chained—yielding control of her body and her pleasure to Nick and his eight hundred years of experience. Every subtle shift, every brush of a hand or press of a fingertip sent a fire racing through her or added to the one that was building up from just a second before. No movement was wasted, no territory unexplored, and just when she thought she'd reached the point where she could take no more, another wave passed through her, leaving her nerve endings raw and alight.

It took a few moments for her to sense the change in him, to realize that Nick's movements were no longer centered on her, but on himself. His forward strokes became more forceful, quick and steady. Nick's eyes were closed and his jaw was clenched as he held himself above her, thrusting with abandon. He was groaning as he pulled back and pushed himself within her so deeply she could have sworn her fillings were about to come lose. Another deep thrust, then a third, and a fourth—

He fell against her, shuddering in climax, and she felt the twitching of his shaft within her. His face was pressed against the side of her neck, pushed tightly against the flesh of her throat and she felt the kiss of his lips. Her heart stopped as she waited for the end, for his teeth to tear into her, to rend her flesh. No matter how much she feared it, there was a part of her that was excited at the thought of finally experiencing that one, unknowable sensation before she fell into darkness.

It never happened.

There was an insistent pressure against her throat; she could feel the hard sharpness of his teeth even through the softness of his lips. But his mouth remained closed as he growled into her neck, fingers catching and pulling in her hair while the shudders passed through him. She'd wrapped her arms around him the instant he'd fallen upon her and she continued to hold him as her own tremors subsided.

It seemed like an eternity until she saw the tension ease out of the muscles of his shoulder. For some reason, Natalie felt like crying again as she stroked the back of his head and held him close to her. Nick took a long, deep breath as he slipped out of her, then raised himself slightly to look down at her.

His eyes were blue—true blue—and she saw no sign of gold within them. He hadn't bitten her, hadn't killed her.

The realization seemed to strike them both at the same time, because he leaned down to kiss her as she rose to kiss him. It was a soft and easy kiss, then Nick slid down beside her, pushing her away from the inside of the couch. Smiling, he rubbed her right arm and shoulder lightly with his fingertips. "I think we can call that a success."

"Ummm." Natalie stretched her legs and curled her toes appreciatively, gazing up at him with half-lidded eyes. "I'm going have to keep an eye on you from now on. Walking around with a condom in your pocket . . . ."

He grinned and ducked down to kiss her ear. "Well, I wanted to be prepared, just in case the urge struck you at a crime scene or something." The grin disappeared and his eyes narrowed, she felt his finger stroking the skin along her arm. "You're all right?"

"Fine." She stretched again, then gave a groan as a thigh muscle tensed.

"No—I'm okay. Just wasn't ready for that work out. God, if I could clone you, box you, and get you in stores by next Christmas, I'd make a mint and drive Stairmasters straight into the ground."

"I'll take that as a compliment." His hand shifted from her arm to her breast, caressing it lightly as he frowned again. "Nat—I smelled blood . . . ."

"Don't panic. I'm fine. Really." She reached up to kiss his nose, then fell back onto the cushions, exhausted by the effort. "Paula said I could expect a little stretching and tearing. 'Minor discomfort.' It wasn't anything I couldn't handle. And, believe me, it didn't last long. What I *do* have to remember is how strong you are." She closed her eyes and snuggled up against him.

"More bruises?" he asked sympathetically, his fingers still lightly stroking her breast.

"Those I'm getting used to." She opened her eyes and gave him a mock-fierce stare. "But I think the last of it knocked a couple of my fillings loose."

There was a faint tint of pink in his cheeks—what passed for a vampire blush and which she only noticed because they were so close. He leaned down and buried his head in her hair again, murmuring, "Sorry. I guess I . . . uh . . . lost it for a bit there."

Natalie stroked his hair and hugged him. "Hungry?" she whispered.

"Ravenous." His breath brushed her ear lightly, then he raised himself on his elbow again, his expression serious. "But . . . it's under control for now. Not for long, but for now." His hand traced the line of her chin in a distracted sort of way. "I was so worried that I'd kill you, or hurt you."

"I can stand a few bruises and a couple of loose fillings if they're part of the package. Believe me, I'm *not* complaining." She slapped his shoulder lightly with the flat of her hand. "And speaking of hungry . . . I haven't eaten anything since lunch. Feed me."

"I assume we're eating in—so order what you'd like." Nick raised himself to one knee and vaulted over her, to the floor. She saw him tie off the end of the used condom—she'd never noticed just when he'd removed it—and began picking up his clothes from the floor. "I need to get cleaned up anyway."

Natalie interlaced her fingers and placed her hands behind her head, enjoying the view. "You look fine from here."

He tossed her skirt at her, along with her stockings, both of which she caught. Her blouse followed, but he held the torn bra at arm's length and frowned. "I think I owe you some lingerie."

"We'll call it even, if you get me a bathrobe and pronto." Clutching her rumpled clothing against her, Natalie rose to her feet and shivered. "It's freezing in here."

As she grabbed one end of the bra, Nick tugged at it, drawing her to him. The clothing fell out of both of their arms as he embraced her. "You can have it as hot as you like," he whispered, trailing kisses behind her ear.

She tucked her head down against his neck and blew on the skin of his throat—which brought about a few immediate responses and none of them unpleasant. "I guess we're not talking about stoking the boiler?"

"In a manner of speaking . . . ."

Their lips met, noses touched, and hands began to roam. She let her fingers define the muscles of his back, pressing lightly against the edges and the contours. This didn't have to go any farther than kissing, touching, hugging . . . and with Nick having not fed immediately about their recent round of exercise, anything more detailed than that might be downright dangerous.

It was a passing thought—which passed right out of her head as he began to nibble the edge of her mouth, one hand cupping her buttock and the other pressed flat against her breast, his palm creating a gentle suction against her nipple. She no longer felt chilled by the air, but was warmed inside and out by his touch.

Until Nick went still again, like a statue made of marble. She pulled back to ask him what was the matter, but he held her tightly, whispering one word in her ear—

"LaCroix."

Her heart suddenly felt as hard and as heavy as marble. She clung to Nick for an instant, her legs getting rubbery beneath her and was heartened as his grip around her tightened protectively. "Here?" she asked, in a broken gasp.

"Nearby. Watching." Nick drew back from her and carefully placed a soft kiss on each of her eyelids. "It's all right. He won't interfere—you made sure of that." When she simply stared at him with wide eyes, he smiled and touched his forehead to her own. "He won't break the bargain you made with him," explained Nick quietly. "You made him promise to leave us alone . . . at least on this score. And short of calling vice on us for indecent exposure—" he tilted his head toward the windows, which were open to the night sky, "he can't touch us. He can't touch us because of you."

She ducked her head and let him crush her to him, some of her fear lessening at the physical contact and the sense of his words. LaCroix couldn't hurt them, not now. He'd hope they'd hurt each other, drive one another away, but that hadn't worked. And what would he do, now that they'd made love on their own, without restraints?

Her breath caught in her throat at that thought and she pulled back slightly

from Nick, feeling the blood rise to her cheeks. "How long has he been here? I mean, did he see us . . . um . . . ?"

"No." He smiled and lifted a hand to her cheek, as if to take warmth from her blush. "No, he just arrived. He's not very happy."

"That would be an understatement." Natalie rested her head against Nick's chest, wanting to cry. Why did LaCroix always do this to her? Just when they'd gotten everything right and things were working well, he walked in to upset the applecart like a bossy mother-in-law. "I should leave," she added, after taking a deep breath. "I should—"

"You should stay. For the night. With me." Nick kissed the length of her neck lightly, sending shivers down her. Instinctively, Natalie pressed her body against him, her leg curling around his . . . and felt him beginning to harden against her.

"With LaCroix *watching*?" she squeaked, horrified. Natalie almost choked on the words and pulled out of his embrace completely. "No—I can't do that." She bent down and picked up an armful of clothing—his, hers, it really didn't matter—and turned toward the stairs. "I'll get a pizza on the way home. But first I'd better get dressed."

"I like you just like this."

She started when Nick appeared in front of her, between her and the staircase. Following through on her first instinct, she tossed the clothes at him and said angrily, "I told you not to *do* that. It gives me the creeps."

"Sorry." He caught hold of her hands and drew her close to him again, his lips touching her own, tickling her ear, then traveling the length of her throat again. "I'll make it up to you," he murmured against her skin.

The hand against her buttocks held him tightly against her, warm flesh to cool, and the knuckles of his other hand skimmed lightly up and down her ribs and flank, stroking and tickling. She felt warm and safe in his arms, no matter how low his body temperature might be. And she wasn't at all surprised that he not only seemed interested in resuming their earlier position on the couch, but was just about ready as well.

"*You* are an exhibitionist," she whispered sharply, just before the hand cupping her buttocks slipped between her legs . . . and wrung a gasp out of her with a few well-placed finger movements.

"I'm proud of you. I don't want to show off—I want to show *you* off."

His hand was continuing to work its magic; Natalie felt her knees begin to give way and dug her fingers into the muscles of his shoulders even as he kissed and nuzzled her. "It's too soon," she whispered frantically. "Nick, you haven't *fed* yet! We've only tried this once—"

The end of the word disappeared in a low moan that started at the tips of his fingers and worked its way up through her chest. Every muscle in her body seemed to come undone at that one moment and she was limp in Nick's arms, panting heavily against his shoulder. When her eyes finally focused again, she glared at his bright eyes and impish smile. "No fa—fair."

"Enough?" he asked, as a second finger slipped into her, beside the first.

Natalie groaned and lowered her head against his chest as the fingers crooked inside her, lightly stroking her inner flesh. She realized that she could play this game, too. Her hand darted between them and her fingers curled around his shaft before he realized exactly what was happening. When his thumb began to stroke against her, she tightened her grip on him and moved her fist upward in a sure, smooth movement.

He groaned and she felt his weight leaning against her for a second. Natalie shivered as Nick's fingers slipped out of her and his hand rose to her shoulder. "Truce?" he asked, in a shaky voice.

She grinned. "Truce." But the ball of her thumb brushed the head of his shaft, pressing down lightly, her fingernail scraping against the sensitive skin. Then she stepped away from him, releasing him with one final, firm stroke.

For a moment she thought Nick was going to fall to his knees. He stumbled toward her, staggered, then rushed at her with a growl, catching her in the mid-section. She shrieked as he lifted her from the floor and he'd no sooner dropped her to the couch than his fingers were trailing up and down her ribs in rapid succession, tickling her.

"Bast—stop! Ow—Ohh! Stop, you son-of-a—" But she laughed and giggled even as she tried to fend him off. He was simply too quick for her. And then, when she'd run out of breath, she lay there panting heavily, with Nick leaning over her.

The kiss took what was left of her breath away. Her toes curled of their own accord. When he finally rose above her, looking down at her with serious eyes, Nick whispered, "I want you. I don't care whether or not LaCroix sees us—I want you. But I'll take 'no' for an answer, Nat. If you're scared . . . if you don't want me right now, it's okay. I never want to hurt you again."

He had more than a way with words—when he forgot himself and spoke his heart, he was a master of language. She reached up her hand to touch his hair, to follow the curve of the cheek and stroke the corner of his mouth. She *did* want him again. And she trusted him.

But Natalie didn't trust the nouns and verbs and adjectives at her command; they were all too weak and feeble, so easily lost or misled. Instead, she placed her arms around his neck and drew him down to her, kissing him thoroughly and letting him know in no uncertain terms with her hands and her mouth and her body how much she wanted him.

It was a few minutes before he broke from her, raising himself over her and locking his elbows. He dropped once to plant a kiss on her nose, then scrambled off the couch with a hushed, "Be right back."

The tension in his voice alarmed her and Natalie sat up quickly, drawing her knees to her chest. She expected him to head directly for the fridge and a bottle of cow blood. They both knew that his control had limits. Much as it saddened her, Natalie bowed her head in resignation, determined not to show him her disappointment or sadness. Better that he be fed than she be dead.

But Nick didn't head for the refrigerator. He was wading through the pile of clothing they'd dropped on the floor, grumbling beneath his breath as he finally extricated his jeans.

She smothered a laugh when she realized exactly what he was doing and placed her hands over her mouth and bowed her head again when she realized that her very eager lover hadn't been content with carrying a single 'good luck charm.' By the time she'd smothered her laughter enough to look up again, he was walking to the couch somewhat sheepishly, confounded by the packaging, which kept slipping out of his hands as he tried to tear it.

"You're laughing at me," he accused, as he sat down on the couch beside her.

"*With* you," she corrected with mock-severity. "Just how 'lucky' did you think you were going to get?" Natalie took the foil packet from his hand and opened it carefully. She dropped the packaging to the floor, then rolled the latex condom between her fingers. "Actually, I'm proud of you. I think you should be rewarded."

Natalie slipped her legs to one side and leaned against him, her fingers caressing his cheeks as he raised an eyebrow in question. And then she very slowly leaned toward his lap.

There was a sudden tension in him, a stillness, as her hand settled at the base of his shaft, caressing softly. He was hard and almost completely erect—she was still surprised at how easily he could be excited and how quickly his body responded to her. Never mind how he seemed ready for another round before she'd managed to get her breath back. It made her wonder how many mortals involved in sexual relationships with vampires had actually expired of exhaustion. That's all the world needed—vampirism as the ultimate aphrodisiac.

Natalie stroked him lightly with her fingertips, getting her first chance to really examine him since their last encounter. She was almost surprised to see there were still small angry marks in his flesh . . . but only just. Paula had said something to that effect, that Nick wouldn't and couldn't heal properly on a diet of cow's blood. The fact that the marks were even there, although barely visible, gave her some indication of how badly he'd been wounded by LaCroix's 'toy.' And why he'd been more than a little skittish when she'd touched him earlier.

His breath rattled in his throat; she sneaked a look up at him and saw that his eyes were closed, his neck leaning back against the cushions of the couch. He'd planted his fists deep into the cushions on either side of his body, his elbows locked. His jaw was clenched tightly, so that she could barely hear the deep growling sounds she was drawing from him.

If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was in pain. In actuality, he was balancing his pleasure with his control over the killer inside of himself.

The thought gave her pause, but she returned to the task at hand. Tentatively, she kissed the head of his shaft. His body shook and he jerked within her grasp at the light touch of her lips. Natalie opened her mouth a little wider and lightly swirled her tongue around the glans at the tip of his shaft.

The growl that arose from him deafened her. His hand grasped the back of her neck through her hair, drawing her away from him, his other hand moving to her left shoulder and fingers digging into her flesh as if to keep himself from falling. Her breath caught in her throat when she spotted the flash of red when he opened his eyes enough to blink.

His hands fell from her and he relaxed, dropping back against the couch. Careful not to let her body rub against his own, she touched the back of her left hand to his cheek—his skin was deathly cold and pale.

"I guess—" he began, voice rough, "I guess I'm just not ready for that yet." His eyes opened—irises gold.

"You need blood." She turned her hand to cup his cheek. "Let's give it a rest, huh? We don't want—"

"No. We can't stop." He pressed his lips against hers forcefully, his arms moving around her. "I won't stop," he whispered in her air. "Not with him here. Not with him *watching*."

Natalie froze in his arms . . . she'd forgotten about LaCroix. Annoyance fanned the faintest embers of anger within her. When Nick continued to kiss her, to stroke her shoulders and her breasts, she placed her hands against his chest and pushed him away. "No. I refuse to be part of a peep show, especially at my age."

"Nat—?"

There was a pleading tone to his voice that only fueled her anger. "No."

Nick's breathing was ragged. When he drew back from her, his eyes were

blue again—which was a major relief. "All right." He let out a long breath, looking away from her. "All right. We'll stop."

She hadn't expected him to give in so easily, especially since it was *very* evident that Nick was more than ready for her. He wiped his face with his hand as she moved closer to him, snuggled up beside him—he didn't push her away as she thought he might. Instead, his right arm wrapped around her shoulder, drawing her close. It was as she rested against his chest that she realized she still had the condom clutched in her right fist.

Natalie wondered why she'd put a stop to this. Was it really because of LaCroix? Or was it something else? Yes, she was worried about Nick's control slipping—doubly so now—although he'd just proved how careful he was being, reacting to danger signals she'd never even noticed. Okay, so maybe she was still a little hesitant about the physical side of this, which she had more than a right to be. That was something else she could lay squarely at LaCroix's door.

She'd thought she'd never have the chance to get back at him for what he'd put her and Nick through, even though they'd won in the end. If she put Nick off now, LaCroix would get exactly what he wanted—proof that even if he hadn't succeeded in driving them apart, all was not perfect in paradise. Not that she expected any physical relationship with Nick to be without many and varied rough spots, but they deserved a honeymoon, didn't they? She'd been more than willing a few seconds ago. And she *did* still want him . . . .

Natalie raised her head to the level of his shoulder and ran the fingers of her left hand through the curls of hair behind his ear. "Are you all right?" she asked hesitantly. "Your skin is so cold."

He closed his eyes and let his head fall forward, so that his chin rested on her forehead. "I'm okay. It was just . . . it was too much, all at once. I couldn't handle it. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. I'll give you a raincheck on that."

He grinned and opened his eyes, shifting to plant a kiss on her forehead and draw her onto his hip, so she could rest against his chest easier. "Thanks."

"Well, that just leaves one, small problem."

"I'll take a cold shower."

"Not *that*." When he looked down at her in concern, she opened her right palm and showed him the condom. "I'd hate to waste this. Think you could put it to good use?"

He picked up the condom from her palm with a look of concentration, lips drawn together tightly in a frown. When he met her gaze almost reproachfully, she swallowed.

"'No' means 'no,'" she explained, clasping her hands together and staring down at her linked fingers. "I can't tell you what it means to me that you understand that. But right now, I want—I don't know *what* I want." Frustrated, she tilted her head to peek at him through a few strands of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. "I want to make sure that if we do this, it's for *us*. I want you because I love you."

Her heart thudded insistently in her chest as Nick looked down at the condom between his fingers, his expression still serious and uncertain. "This is getting complicated."

"It is, isn't it?" she asked unhappily. Throwing her arms around his neck, she pressed herself against him, hugging him tightly. "I want you to be happy. And safe. Happy and safe. And mortal. Happy and safe and—"

Nick leaned down to kiss her, cutting off her litany. When they parted, he rested his forehead against hers, smiling. "At least we're heading in the same direction. I *want* to be happy, and safe, and mortal . . . with you." He held up the condom and asked. "So, are you going to help me with this or not?"

"Only if you hold still." She was all but sitting in his lap, now. Natalie shifted so that his shaft was pressing against her inner thigh. As she leaned forward to set the condom in place, his leg spasmed and he moved her. Of course, one hand went around the base of his shaft for support and the other against his chest—but she was pretty certain which one of the two caused him to let out a groan as he threw his head back against the couch cushions. "I told you to hold still," she scolded, lightly stroking the base of the shaft as if in apology.

"Hold *still?*" Nick's voice was more than a little shaky as he placed one hand firmly on her left shoulder and the other dug down into the cushion on the couch. "How am I supposed to hold still with you wriggling provocatively and grabbing at me?"

Grabbing . . . well, he had a point there. But this other—

"I was *not* wriggling provocatively," she said defensively. Natalie took great care as she placed the condom against the tip of his shaft and began to roll the latex down over him. "I couldn't 'wriggle provocatively' if I tried."

"Oh, right. Like when you're wearing scr—scrubs—" She was slipping her hand over the latex, setting it in place to her satisfaction . . . and sending very noticeable shivers through Nick. "—And not a whole lot else? You're going to t—t—tell me you haven't wriggled provocatively?"

Natalie sat upright, her immediate task finished with one final stroke along the condom—yep, he was *definitely* still interested—and met his gaze. "You're kidding, right? Nick, when I wear scrubs, the whole point is *not* to wear much else. It's protective gear for my work. Like firefighters wear protective gear when they fight fires."

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Let's just say that I've never been tempted to sneak up behind a firefighter and . . . ."

She widened her eyes as his sentence trailed off. "And—?" Natalie prompted.

There was *that* grin, mischievous and self-satisfied. "Allow me to demonstrate."

Provocatively or no, she wriggled—or tried to—when he grabbed hold of her buttocks and squeezed. She was startled enough that she fell off his thigh and back against the cushions of the couch and Nick was supporting himself over her before she could blink. "So," she said, after clearing her throat and staring up into those blue eyes, "do you finally have me where you want me?"

"I want you anywhere." He kissed the tip of her nose. "*Everywhere.* But here is good."

"I'm glad you approve." Natalie pushed herself up to plant a kiss on his lips, but his arm snaked beneath her head, supporting her as he refused to release her mouth, nibbling and gnawing and exploring, while his hand cupped her breast and began to stroke her flesh. She let him support her head because it gave her hands the freedom to roam across the expanse of his chest and before long they were moaning and panting frantically against one another's mouths as if it were a contest to see who might give in first.

If it *was* a contest, Nick won. She decided that during a brief moment of clarity between waves of tingling and warmth when she found that he'd slipped himself inside her. He was less cautious and more ruthless this time, pounding hard against her from the start. Having already resigned herself to the fact that any continuing sexual relationship with him was going to mean bruises of one sort or another, she was immediately pleased to find that his piston-like thrusting was neither mindless or haphazard. He knew *exactly* what he was doing, which she realized barely a split second before her nerve endings melted in an onslaught of sensation that left her gasping for air . . . until the second wave hit.

Natalie was almost certain she screamed in utter abandon somewhere along the line—loud and long enough to give him pause, certainly, because he slowed his thrusts down considerably after that. Or it could simply have been that he'd reached his own limits. When Nick threw back his head and yelled, she saw a flash of gold before he clenched his eyes shut and the shine of sharp, white fangs in his mouth. But then he tucked his head down again and buried his face in the skin of her neck and shoulder and her hair. She wrapped her arms and legs around him tightly through the last final thrusts, praying for both their sakes that he had control enough not to surrender to the beast inside him that desired her blood as much as he desired her flesh.

And when Nick lay panting and shuddering against her for a second time that evening, Natalie basked in the warmth of afterglow. Then, and only then, did she remember LaCroix's presence, hearing the howl of frustration that rattled the glass of the skylight and probably every window for three blocks around. As content as she ever thought she would be, Natalie stroked Nick's hair and closed her eyes, measuring the difference of their beating hearts and thankful that love could survive almost anything, given time and care enough.

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

Nick paused just inside the door to the Raven. The height of the steps gave him a better view of the place, a vantage point from which he could easily spot the lighter, bluish glow of the bodies of his fellow vampires hidden amongst the crimson-hot, red blushes of mortal souls. The sight of so much mortal heat juxtaposed with so much calculated chill should have alarmed him.

It didn't. Not at the moment. If he were being honest with himself, he didn't really care, didn't really want to think about it. Why LaCroix had been willing to take the bar off Janette's hands when she'd left was still something of a mystery to him. Not that many ventures his vampire master had engaged upon in the past had ever made sense to him at the start. In time he'd learned not to question. If it involved him, he'd figure it out soon enough. And, hopefully, not too late.

"A bit early for you, isn't it, Detective?" asked LaCroix, suddenly appearing at his elbow.

A space appeared at the bar almost before LaCroix could gesture, two bright young vampire things melting away and into the crowd before Nick had a chance to distinguish their genders. Not that it matter—long hair, jeans, and leathers. They all looked alike any more.

"All things change, Nicholas," said LaCroix softly. He moved behind the bar, placed a glass on the counter, then picked up a bottle and placed it beside the glass. "So, tell me . . . have you wearied of your mortal toy already?"

With a grim smile, Nick held up one finger. "*That's* off limits," he reminded LaCroix sharply.

"Ah, yes. I *did* promise, didn't I? How foolish of me. I suppose it's the

romantic in my nature." LaCroix smiled and opened the bottle of blood. From where Nick was standing, it smelled like cow. "I gave my word and you know I'll keep it. Your relationship with your doctor has nothing to fear . . . from me."

LaCroix pushed the glass across to him. Nick lifted it to his lips, sniffed just to make certain it was cow, then took a sip from the glass. "My 'relationship' with Natalie is my business."

"Um. Which might lead one to wonder why you are *here* instead of—?" With a light wave of his hand, LaCroix gestured toward the club. "You must bring your lady by some time—I've been told this is a place of romance."

Nick placed his glass back on the counter and turned his back to the bar. "Not romance," he corrected, watching the crowd. "Lust. Animal instinct. Predator and prey—"

"As I said, romance." LaCroix smiled as Nick cast him a sharp look. "There's romance in everything. And what could be more romantic than base, animal *need*." He picked up the bottle and refilled Nick's glass. "Is that what draws you here, I wonder—need? Is there something that your sexual romps with your mortal friend can't provide? Is something missing, Nicholas? Is *that* why you're here?"

He picked up the glass and turned his back to the bar, then quickly downed the cow blood. He shouldn't have come here. LaCroix knew him too well—there were times he was certain LaCroix could read his mind, or his soul . . . if he still had one.

"Natalie and I are fine, no thanks to you," Nick added, giving LaCroix a scathing glance over his shoulder. "There's nothing missing. She's everything I need."

"Then I'm—what's the correct phrase? Oh, yes . . . then I'm happy for you both. She's a remarkable woman."

"Yes. She is." Nick placed his glass back on the counter and turned to watch the crowd again. The music was loud with a bass beat that found an echoing chord within him. Just short of a human heartbeat, it called to his predatory senses. He could smell the perfume on the women, even at this distance, the mixture of chemicals and animal musk and sweat, as they danced beneath the muted, colored lights. Predator and prey, sexual animals stalking mates, if only for a night of pleasure. Need, as LaCroix had said. Instinct.

Why *was* he here?

Because he was in need. Because LaCroix was right—there was something missing. The blood, yes. He'd stopped feeding regularly in another attempt to wean himself from it. The less blood he drank regularly, the easier it was not to bite Natalie when they had sex. He was getting used to the constant presence of the hunger. It slowed him, dulled his senses, but it made him less dangerous to her. He couldn't afford to be dangerous to her. He promised himself that he'd never hurt her again.

But there were other things, too. He had to watch his strength, take care not to crush or bruise her flesh, or break any bones. In fun one morning he'd tackled her, knocked the wind out of her, and then had her in his arms and half way down the back stairs to the Caddie and the hospital before she'd convinced him that she was all right. Not to mention that there were certain mortal limitations to which he wasn't at all subject.

He respected her right to turn him away. If Natalie wasn't interested, the matter was dropped. Of course, that did nothing to help him fulfill *his* needs . . . .

The women danced, more flesh than clothing, skin glistening with sweat.

His mouth was dry.

Nick picked up his glass and took a healthy swig from it before he realized that the blood was human. He turned instantly to his left to confront his master, but LaCroix was gone.

"That's my drink," said a voice from his right.

Urs smiled sweetly and took the glass from his hand as he swallowed. She picked up another from the bar, met his eyes, then lifted the glass and sniffed at it. Wrinkling her nose, she handed him the glass of cow blood. "I thought they were kidding."

"About?" The taste of human blood lingered in his mouth and it took an effort on his part not to lick his lips.

"You drinking that swill. Cow?" She shuddered, a none-too-delicate movement.

"You get used to it."

That was the lie. He told it to himself as he lifted the glass and let the obscenity of the animal blood obliterate the lingering magnificence of the human blood from his mouth. He told it to himself every time he drank the foul replacement. Just as he told himself that it was a step toward freedom, toward mortality, only slightly less holy than not drinking blood at all.

What did one more lie matter, after all?

"Vachon?" he asked, trying to maintain a semblance of small-talk.

"Hmn?" Urs leaned closer, her shoulder touching his.

He could smell the barest touch of perfume over a delightful female musk. He gestured with his head, out toward the crowd. "Is Vachon here?"

She shrugged, her expression noncommittal. "Maybe. Probably not tonight. He doesn't like the band. Says they pump up the volume to cover the fact that they only know two chords."

Nick grinned at the assessment and listened as he sipped at his drink. "He's right."

"They'll get better. Or they'll give it up." Urs gave a slight shake of head, as if dismissing the matter. "They always do."

"You don't like the band. And you're not here for the drinks."

"No. I'm not." Urs met his eyes with a cold, even stare. "But I'm here. I'll go home with someone or take someone home with me. He'll kick me out or I'll kick him out. Then I'll sleep. And then I'll be back here." She shrugged again, but her eyes seemed somewhat distant as she added softly, "And someday, maybe the band will be better."

"That's a good way to get hurt."

"The best," she answered quickly, then raised her glass to a passing vampire, as if saluting him.

The recipient of her attention was tall and thin, but muscular. His T-shirt was torn—artistically, Nick guessed—and the feral grin that crossed his features when he caught Urs' gesture did nothing to endear him to Nick's heart. Before he could approach, Nick rose to his feet and stood before Urs, blocking out the newcomer. He held out his hand and asked, "Would you like to dance?"

She seemed a little stunned by the question, then placed her hand in his and let him lead her past the annoyed vampire grunge-stud.

The dance floor was crowded and Nick fought back the assault of mortal heartbeats that assailed him, drowning in the proximity of so much warm, available flesh. But Urs was beside him, near him, around him, an island of cool respite. When she danced, her smile disappeared and her movement became sensuous. There was art in the way she moved, her arm slipping over his shoulder, her hips grinding against his own, her back arching. Her hair was gold in the play of lights and he caught it in his hands, bringing her to his lips for a brief kiss . . . but then she darted away again.

The band began another song right after the last, not pausing for breath. Urs turned to leave the dance floor, but Nick caught her hand. She touched a finger to his lip to stop him and said, "Sorry. Gotta go find my date for the evening."

"What about me?"

He hadn't thought about the idea until the words left his lips; Urs actually seemed startled by them. Then she smiled and raised a hand to his hair, running her fingers through it and mussing it as if he were a child. "I need a bad boy. Nick . . . you're just too good for me."

"How bad do you want me to be?"

She smiled again, her eyes half-closed in disbelief, then she started to say something. Nick pulled her into his embrace and began to kiss her fiercely. His free hand snaked up beneath her vest and the white halter top between them. At first, he massaged her breasts gently, but then two of his fingers found her nipple and he pinched, hard.

He swallowed Urs' gasp of surprise and pain in the kiss, refusing to release her until he knew that he had won. His free hand traveled down her back and it was when he felt the tension in her lower back ease that he finally pulled away.

"Was that what you wanted?" he whispered.

Urs looked at him suspiciously, as if trying to determine exactly what he thought he was doing. She removed his hand from her halter top, pulling the clothing down into place, then intertwined her fingers with his almost shyly. There was a long moment of hesitation, of measuring the commitment in his eyes.

Nick didn't flinch, didn't blink, didn't look away. Urs smiled faintly, leaned close to him, and answered, "Let's go," as she drew him behind her.

He fell into step, following her through the crowd. There was an instant when he knew he was being watched—caught the grunge-stud eyeing him in a none-too-friendly manner. His immediate impulse was to bare his fangs and snarl, but he couldn't allow himself that luxury, not with so many mortals around. Instead, he merely smiled, tugging on Urs' hand and pulling her within his embrace as they walked. To the victor went the spoils and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that he'd won, the curvaceous blonde beneath his arm the only visible trophy that he needed or wanted.

And he *did* want her. The touch of flesh against flesh—even when cloth intervened between them as she led him to the back of the club—made his skin tingle. The scent of her was powerful; musk and lust and ancient female smells that brought to mind Janette and not-Janette. Nick let himself drown in the scent of her, surrendered himself to sensation alone, let his mind drift as they bypassed the doorway that led to LaCroix's private office, taking the other hall. There were restrooms, then a corridor and stairs that led below; to the basement, the storerooms, the cellars where vampires slept during the bright, burning daylight.

No words passed between them, but none were needed. Nick followed where she led and Urs knew where she was going, even in the darkness. No light accompanied them down the deserted staircase or to the lower quarters. When Urs passed through a door, he entered the room behind her, then was faintly surprised when she turned to face him. Her hand pressed lightly on his shoulder, indicating that he should let his weight close the door.

Nick leaned against it, aware of the wood at his back even through the

leather of his jacket. Standing before him, Urs leaned closer, her lips touching his, her body brushing against him, tantalizingly close then drawing away.

The room was dark, but it smelled clean. He could make out a bed and some posters on the walls, a few pieces of furniture.

But there was something far more interesting on which to concentrate. Remembering Urs' criteria for his presence, he grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her close to him, his mouth capturing hers and holding her there. Her resistance was brief and futile—a token for form's sake only. If she'd been serious, he would have released her. At least, that's what he told himself.

Urs returned his ardor in kind, her tongue playing along the inside of his mouth. She was cold porcelain with round, full cheeks, a china doll with golden curls and old, sensitive eyes. Her hands slipped onto his shoulders, pushing back his jacket, slowly removing it from him while they kissed. He barely noticed that it fell to the floor, his lips finding the measure of her jawline, nibbling at the skin from ear to ear, tracing patterns. Urs was pale, perfect flesh and bright soft curls.

It was as he licked her jaw that he felt her shift position. Still leaning against him, her hands traveling down the length of his arms, she unbuttoned his shift buttons with her mouth. He could feel each spot of moisture through his shirt and the T-shirt beneath that as she moved from button to button, leaving each intact and the holes neatly threaded. If there was an urgency in her actions, she never betrayed it, working smoothly and evenly down his chest. Lifting the tails of his shift from his trousers, she continued to unfasten each connection. There was a brief and momentary pressure at his belt buckle, then subsequent slow spots of pressure further down the front of his trousers until his shirt hung open.

She hesitated then, kneeling in front of him, face tilted upward expectantly, as if waiting for her cue. Nick wrapped his hands in the mass of her hair, glorying in the thickness of it, then stroked her neck and shoulders with his fingertips, pressing her cheek against his crotch.

That must have been the sign she'd been awaiting, some mastery from him. Almost immediately, she reached out her hand and slipped the catch of his belt from the buckle. Pulling the length of it from the loops slowly, Urs allowed it to drop to the floor. She undid the trouser button and the zipper was opened with a soft, metallic hiss, his jeans dropping away from him, carried to the floor by the weight of his wallet and his keys in the pockets.

There was a draft from somewhere, a whisper of cool air across his legs. His penis was straining against the opening in his shorts, then he felt her hand upon him, freeing him from confinement. Nick took a long, slow breath as her fingers danced along the length of him—his shaft was hardening with the slightest touch from her. He reached down to grab each of her wrists, then brought them together and held them high above her head.

Urs' bright blue eyes sparkled as she hesitated, glancing up at him—but she seemed pleased by his initiative. If anything, doubly pleased when his other hand buried itself in her blonde curls, pushing her face toward his crotch again.

Her mouth was cool and wet, her tongue soft as she lapped at him. One long stroke from the base of his shaft to the tip nearly undid him—his body jerked back against the wooden door with an angry thud. But there was no pause in her attentions. He stared across the room, unable to look down, content with imagining the sight of what he felt—she coated his member with kisses, her full lips tickling and teasing, her teeth nibbling at the sensitive flesh that was rising higher and harder with each passing second. A sigh escaped him, ending in a groan as she nipped and sucked the width of him, but not the length. Closing his eyes, he imagined that bow-shaped mouth around him, the wet-depths, the suction . . . .

With a growl, he pulled on her hair, tugging her away from him, letting her see the gold in his eyes as he stared down at her, his other hand still holding his wrists tightly against his sternum. Her eyes widened and he saw that she knew what he wanted, what he was demanding. Again, there was no hesitation from her.

His shaft bounced as she licked the tip of it lightly, then it disappeared between her lips. Nick threw his head back against the door again, brilliant stars cluttering his vision as he felt the first real suction. His hips pressed forward suddenly, his hand holding her head in place as he shoved most of his length into her mouth in one quick thrust.

Whether Urs had expected the movement, she adapted quickly, her head tilting back so that she could take all of him into her mouth and throat. He hesitated only an instant before slowly pulling back from her, feeling the suction of her lips closed around his shaft, the rough sensation of her teeth barely touching his flesh as he withdrew, until only the tip of his penis remained within her lips.

Twice more he thrust quickly and withdrew slowly, then a fourth time . . . and then something within him snapped. It was as if all of the delicious tension had given way and had left him on his own, to spin wildly out of control. Pulling at her wrists, Nick switched their positions, so that Urs' back was to the door and he was standing free. He began to thrust deep into her mouth and throat, his hand between the back of her head and the door as he slammed into her time and time again. It wasn't the vampire within him, but something more animalistic and more basic that drove him. He didn't care

about the blood, only release of the pressure that had built within him, was *still* building, as he slipped in and out of that soft, wet cavity.

Finally, Nick felt something within him begin to give, the tightness of his balls as they drew closer to his body. Dropping his hold on Urs' hands and hair, he placed his palms against the door and thrust once more, slamming her head back against the wood, burying himself in her mouth and throat.

The release was electric and immediate, a charge that traveled up from his groin and through his chest. His heart pounded once and then again, two beats in close proximity as he felt his seed pump through his shaft. He was helpless in the hold of ecstasy, his hips bucking, slamming her head back against the door as he came. Time stopped for a long moment and his own shouts echoed in his ears—wordless, mindless, and yet somehow still shockingly profane.

Clarity returned later . . . it was over. He rested his forehead against the door, his hands still supporting his weight. Most of his shaft was still held by Urs and she was sucking on it lightly. Once he'd returned to his senses, he placed a hand on her cheek, stroking it with his thumb and she opened her mouth so that he could withdraw. Then Nick sank to the floor beside her and took her in his arms as he leaned his back against the door, cradling Urs against his chest.

A wave of contentment washed over him and every nerve in his bodily felt eerily stilled, as if the experience had worn out his ability to feel. He was numb and there was a peace that attended that feeling. Rhythmically, he brushed Urs' hair with his fingers and closed his eyes, lounging in the afterglow.

Distantly, he recognized the whisper of words against his T-shift, her voice soft. "What?" he asked sleepily.

"How?" She shifted in his arms and he opened his eyes to find her drawn back from him, sitting on the floor, eyes wide. "There wasn't any blood. I didn't taste any—"

With a slight smile, Nick shook his head slightly and closed his eyes again. "There was some."

"No. Not enough. Not nearly enough."

Her knuckles played gently along the side of his face. Nick opened his eyes, grasped her hand in his and drew it to his lips, kissing it. "It doesn't matter."

"It *does*. Something's wrong. Something's wrong with you."

He worried at her hand with his tongue until her fingers unclenched, then planted a wet kiss in the center of her palm. "There's nothing wrong with *you*." Reaching forward, he drew her to his lips, began to kiss her, but released her when Urs pulled away.

She stared at him, arms folded across her chest, her fingers traveling up and down the flesh of her arms as if trying to still her fear. After a moment, she stumbled to her feet and walked across the room, her back toward him. "No. Something's wrong. That shouldn't have happened. We both know that shouldn't have happened. You need blood—*we* need blood before we can climax."

There was a fearful note in her tone that annoyed him—it had to be annoyance, because it certainly couldn't have been worry, now could it? Nick slipped out of his shoes, stepped out of his trousers, then walked to Urs. Standing behind her, he placed his arms around her, the hold gentle but not to be broken, even by her tentative push at his grip. "I don't feed as often as the rest of you," he said in a soft and soothing manner, trying to calm her fears with his tone as well as his touch. Nick kissed her hair and the side of her face, small, comforting gestures. "And I drink cow. Maybe that's what makes the difference."

"Cow," echoed Urs, but she sounded unconvinced.

"Cow." Nick mimicked the word, borrowing a disdainful manner that Janette had used, then licked beneath the side of Urs' jaw lightly. He felt some of the tension ease from her, her body pressing against him . . . and his shaft, which was already beginning to show signs of stirring again. "Don't tell me you've never tasted cow before tonight?"

"Once or twice." She snuggled back against him and turned her head as he continued to nibble down the length of her neck—he could feel the shivers run through her. "Usually when we were on the run. Never by choice."

His left hand slipped up beneath her tank top to her breast. Nick rested the weight of her flesh against the back of his hand, his fingers massaging her skin lightly. He listened for the sudden catch of breath, the light moan that indicated that he'd found just the right spot.

Janette had taught him well. Urs arched her back again and sighed, her cheek resting on his shoulder. "That's nice."

He pinched the skin just beneath her nipple, grinning when she let out a squeal. "I thought you didn't like 'nice.'"

Her body stiffened, growing utterly and eerily still. "I don't get 'nice,'" she whispered.

It was as if some part of her soul had departed, the spirit had left her and she'd become nothing more than a fleshy, empty mannequin. He began to caress the skin of her breast again more slowly and tenderly than he had before. "You deserve 'nice," he told her, letting the words rumble out against the skin of her cheek and throat, through his kisses.

"Maybe." There was pause and another long sigh. "They don't give me

'nice.' They either want to hurt me or save me. It's easier to deal with the ones who want to hurt me. It happens and it's done."

Her body pressed against his own, he could sense the relaxation in her muscles as he massaged her breast, a slow seduction. "And the ones who want to save you?"

A low, unhappy chuckle escaped her. "It takes too long. Sooner or later, they find out that they can't. The first way's better—the hurt's over faster and we both get what we want." She caught his hand and slipped it out from beneath her top. She brought his palm to her lips and drew a line down his index finger to his wrist with her tongue, worrying the flesh at the wrist lightly with her teeth, but not breaking the skin.

His breath caught deep within him at the sensuality of the gesture, her tongue eliciting an electric warmth that spread through his body. His shaft twitched in reaction, trapped beneath her pelvis. When she looked up at him, her eyes were blue and depthless, gold-specks swimming within. "Now . . . what do you want?"

Nick leaned forward and planted a light kiss on the tip of her nose, attempting to banish her serious and somewhat suspicious expression. "To be nice. To you."

"You can try," she said breathily, reaching up to kiss his nose, as he had done to her. Then Urs pulled away. His hand in her own, she led him over to the bed in a corner of the room. "But it won't work. It never does."

He gave a brief glance at the bed—very chic and feminine, lace edgings, the coverlet imprinted with tiny roses. It seemed so unlike the sex-goddess who seemed equally at home in the leathers and attitude of a biker chic or in the skimpy, trimmed outfit of a dancer whose gyrations were meant to rouse a crowd of men to thirst. Urs seated herself on the bed, still holding his hand, and let her other hand range along the coverlet, a distant look in her eyes. "It was a gift," she said absently, although whether trying to convince him or to herself, he couldn't be certain. "Not a payment, just a gift. I don't get many of those."

Seating himself beside her on the coverlet, Nick lifted his hands to her face. He stared into her eyes and felt something stir within his soul. In many ways she was a kindred spirit, wounded as a mortal, yet unable to recover her sense of self through the immortality she'd been given. He could well understand why so many would want to 'save' her.

And why others wouldn't be able to deny the urge to hurt her. Because that was there, too, a twin to the first longing. Despite the world-weariness in her eyes, there was also a fragile innocence within her, a challenge to which his dark side was more than eager to respond. It wanted to break her, hurt her, mold her into something strong and sharp and vicious. How easy it would be for her to become the darkest and most dangerous among them, a killer without remorse, a fiend that existed only for the thrill of bloody and violent debauchery.

She must have known that it was within her, the way that she lowered her eyes told him that much. Urs turned away from him and removed her vest, then pulled her tube top over her head, tossing both pieces of clothing to the floor. There was no pride or shame in her partial nudity, just an acceptance of the inevitability, a resignation to what had gone before and what was yet to be.

Nick reached out a hand to her shoulder and drew her closer, lowering his mouth to her breasts. His hand slipped down her naked back, supporting her, and her hands clasped around his neck. He fought back the dark beast within him and kept his movements delicate and soft. She deserved worship, in spirit and flesh. He could try to give her that.

Her skin was soft, fragrant with the remnants of a bath soap and the blood. No matter how hard he tried to ignore that blood scent, it lingered, enticing and erotic. There was something about her that screamed sex, even when she remained still, silent and aloof. Her moans of pleasure only made it worse, like raking fingernails down a blackboard, disruptive and discordant and very, very arousing.

His free hand massaged the flesh of the other breast, careful not to touch the nipple—it would have its own attention when he'd finished with the first. Long, slow strokes with his tongue across the broad flesh at the underside of the breast, the barest flick across the tip of the nipple, brief suction, a light brush of his lips against the faintly colored skin of the aureole . . . .

She was panting by the time he'd finished the second breast. One of her legs straddled his lap, and the other was behind him. He could feel the moistness of her even through the cut-off jeans, his own shaft responding in kind, stiff and rampant through the fly in his shorts.

Without warning, she pulled him close and began to kiss him, tongue and teeth and fangs. There was an instant of hesitation on his part, of panic, then one of her fangs sliced into his tongue and he tasted blood.

Blood.

That was it. The blood.

Whatever hold he had on the darkness within him was loosed instantly by the salt taste of his own blood. He met her kiss with equal and then greater ferocity, tearing, slashing, tasting her mouth and her lips and her tongue, beating back her attack and then following after, driving her desperately into retreat.

But the beast within him wouldn't allow a retreat—not from this. Too

long he'd held it in check, too long it had remained unfettered. His movements became harsh and brutal as a sense of urgent need swept through him. A moment of cloth pinching skin, then his shorts were torn away. Urs was thrown back onto the bed and he attacked her jeans. The button at the fly snapped free as he undid the fastening. The cloth wouldn't tear, resisting him, and he finally gave up. With a pull, he drew them down to her knees, then knelt on them, only dimly realizing that he'd trapped her legs.

Her eyes were gold, almost red in panic and surprise. She uttered a startled shriek as he pressed his knee between her legs, forcing her open to him. Nick found his destination by scent and by touch; she was ready, but he little cared. There was only the need within him, the beast that surged inside, freed from confinement. He entered her and thrust, one hand beneath her hips, pulling her up to him even as he pushed into her, going deep in a single movement.

The cool of her flesh, the frantic pressure of her muscles around him seemed wrong . . . but only for an instant. Growling low in his throat, Nick brushed away Urs' hands easily, pinning one down on the bed as he rested his weight on the wrist, then slowly withdrew his shaft from her. Her panic drew her tightly around him and he gasped at the sensation of it, his shaft feeling harder and firmer than he had ever remembered. The agony was delicious, but the beast wanted release, wanted fire, wanted blood.

He pounded into her brutally, ruthlessly, carried by the hunger for blood that burned within him. Short, sharp, sudden thrusts lifted him into the fire. Victorious, he stared down at her, only dimly noting that her eyes were glazed, almost unfocused. She had long since stopped trying to resist him.

Nick stilled at that realization and a cold hand settled over his heart as he looked down at her, at the pain in her eyes, her grimace. But the beast overcame him again and there was no choice but to finish it. He gritted his teeth, grasped her hips and thrust into her again and again, hard and deep, all vampire speed and strength and lust for flesh and blood combined. Her exposed neck was like a siren song he couldn't ignore. As the fire within rose toward the apex, he threw himself down upon her and bit savagely into the flesh of her neck.

The taste of her blood set off a chain reaction within him, explosions of images and sensations that the beast consumed. He felt her teeth slide into his neck as well; a second shock followed the first, and the electricity running throughout his body left him to shudder and shiver helplessly as he emptied himself within her. It was all fire and burning, passion and sensation for the first few seconds, like always. Her blood was sweet and wild, the innocence of strawberries mingled with a darker, ancient flavor of bitter mandrake or belladonna. He tasted her and he tasted what was within her, other blood, other lives, other vampires.

The seconds or minutes between had no meaning. He drifted in that ecstasy, then pulled his fangs from her shoulder and rested his forehead against the cool skin of her flesh. Nick felt her arm across his back, her body shivering and shuddering beneath him.

Remorse, regret and guilt settled over him—three familiar cloaks that covered him with subsequent chills even as he withdrew from her and moved to lie on the bed beside her. On impulse, he leaned past her to grab the drape of the coverlet and pull it over her naked and abused body. He couldn't stand to see the marks of his violence upon her. They'd fade in moments, but he couldn't bear even a glimpse of them. What was he doing?

What had he done?

There were streaks of red on her cheeks, tracks of tears. Light sobs still racked her body beneath the coverlet. Nick drew beside her, expecting her to pull away . . . but she didn't. Urs' eyes were closed, her face turned toward the door. She was empty, a doll once again, devoid of spirit, flesh to be used and discarded.

In the past, he would have left her. What had been done could not be undone and better to get past it and pretend that it had never happened. That was the way it had always been—his remorse and guilt would remain locked within his heart and he would suffer on his own with what he had done.

Something stayed him this time. He rested his hand upon her neck, his fingers tracing the fading marks of his fangs on her throat, wincing at the savagery of the tracks. He'd done this to her, as so many had before. Even with the best of intentions, he'd been unable to control the beast within him. He'd ravaged her flesh and her soul, discarded his promises without even a second's thought, and given the beast free rein.

The echoes of her memories settled within him, accompanied by the afterglow. He stared down at her golden curls and saw candlelight instead. There was someone else with her, cool flesh and ancient, old, the gift of the coverlet, words about fragile beauty, kind words, warm words, lovely words . . . .

LaCroix.

Nick's breath stilled at the realization. He ran his hand along the lace edge of the coverlet he'd drawn over her, knowing that she and LaCroix had been together . . . and more than once. Her memories of him were soft and sensuous, caring—LaCroix *caring?*—and attentive, loving. Those moments were treasured things, held deep within her. Yes, there were flashes of Vachon and others, Vachon more than any, but her blood held LaCroix's attentions in a place of honor and respect and worship.

"He understands me," she whispered, as if sensing his thoughts. "He

knows what I am. What I need. But he won't kill me, he won't let me go." Then she turned, eyes bright, sadness still lingering. Her hand raised toward his face. "I should have stopped this. I shouldn't have let this happen—"

Nick grabbed her hand and brought her palm to his lips, murmuring, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt—"

The word stopped him, lingering in his brain, drawing forth the echo of other words, other promises.

Hurt.

'I'll never hurt you again.'

Natalie.

What had he done?

He was only distantly aware that Urs had shifted, sitting behind him. Her arms moved around his chest and she rested her head on his shoulder. "I didn't know," she said. "I didn't know what it was. Now I've let you ruin it." Her lips pressed against the flesh of his shoulder. "I thought you needed a break, you needed to unwind. I'm sorry . . . ."

Nick stared across the darkness of the room—but that was only a sham of shadows. He could see everything clearly with his enhanced vision. Urs' blood flowed through his veins, strengthening the vampire within him, invigorating him. He knew immediately how much was lacking when he refrained from drinking human blood, how much the vampire within him thrived on it, desired it.

Urs drank human blood. She had no moral constraints, no guilt about feeding from those who were kin to other mortals who might mean more to her than life itself. Because they didn't. Mortals were the other—she was a vampire who dwelt among vampires.

He was not. In feeding from her, he'd taken another giant step backward. This time, however, the demon that had possessed him had been himself. He'd been frustrated, unsatisfied, not with what Natalie was able to give to him, but that he couldn't have it all. So he'd thrown what he'd had away. Now, he had nothing.

His control was teetering on the edge—he could feel it. Nick shuddered, knowing that even the chains which had aided their experiment in what Natalie had called his 'physical therapy' might not be enough to hold him now. Did he dare even take her into his arms again? To kiss her on the cheek? He was afraid of what he might do to her.

He was afraid of telling her what he'd done. She'd leave him. He wouldn't blame her. On every level possible he'd been thoughtlessly and completely unfaithful. Natalie had to leave him. And if by some miracle she didn't, he'd have to leave her, for her own protection.

"It's not your fault." Turning in her arms, Nick held her close against him, but this time the proximity of her flesh dampened his ardor. He kissed her forehead lightly, then rested his chin on the top of her head. "I hurt you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I told you, it's what I get."

The resignation in her voice tore the wound in his heart a little deeper and he held her more tightly. There was no stirring within him, no lust. He'd exhausted the vampire for the moment and Urs meant nothing to him, not in the way that Natalie did. She was a only friend he'd wounded. He'd hurt her in trying to hurt himself.

"Collateral damage," he said, with a wan smile.

"What?" Urs tilted her head to glance up at him.

Nick held the smile a moment longer, said, "Nothing," and kissed her forehead again lightly.

"What will you do?" she asked.

Nick released her, shifted position, and then drew the blanket up around her, covering her. "What *can* I do? Leave."

Catching his hand, Urs held him beside her a moment longer. "But she loves you. And you love her, I saw it in your blood. If you leave, you'll only hurt her and yourself."

"If I stay, I'll kill her." Nick placed her hand lightly on her shoulder, pinning the coverlet around her.

"Leaving isn't the answer," she protested.

He smiled at her, then slipped off the bed and picked up his underwear—the briefs were torn and useless. "When did you become an oracle of the heart?"

"You learn things." When he glanced down at her, Urs nodded solemnly. "Like in the fairy-tale—you can fight all you want, but you're trapped until the handsome prince comes to kiss you. What they don't tell you is that when he kisses you, he doesn't rescue you . . . he just makes your hell eternal."

The ruined clothing fell from his hand and he stared at her, a cold feeling spreading through his chest, knowing that he'd made that mistake himself in the past. "You must hate Vachon, for what he's done to you."

"Hate him?" Her eyes were wide and puzzled. "How could I hate him? His heart was in the right place—he *wanted* to help me. He didn't know how and he made a mistake, but he *tried*." Urs smiled faintly. "LaCroix wouldn't have made the same mistake—he would have understood. He would have let me die."

Nick bowed his head for a moment, knowing that she was right—LaCroix *would* have let her die, as mortals did. He couldn't quite understand that

relationship between them now, hadn't been aware of it until he'd tasted Urs' memories along with her blood. LaCroix seemed to protect her, cherish her. He knew enough not to try to save her. It was a side of his master that didn't make sense.

What would LaCroix think when he saw Urs' memories of Nick's attack on her, his selfish, violent assault, his abandonment to his nature?

"I've gotta go," he muttered, heading for his clothes, which were lying by the door. He slipped into them quickly, but every movement was a blistering reminder of his previous actions; the rough denim of his jeans against the flesh of his buttocks of how he'd torn away his clothing, the sequential fastening of the buttons of his shirt echoing the slow and seductive unfastening that Urs had managed.

Finally dressed, Nick hesitated, his fingers around the doorknob, then turned to look back at Urs. She was sitting on the bed still wrapped in the coverlet, roses upon a bed of white. His heart ached at the beauty of her, of what he'd done to her. It horrified him that LaCroix would be the one to give her some measure of the peace her wounded spirit so deserved.

What could he say? There were no words that could express his sorrow at what he'd done, his anger for having hurt her as he had.

Her eyes met his and she nodded once, seeming to understand. But that still wasn't enough. He stalked across the floor and sat down on the bed beside her. Unfastening a cuff button, he drew back his sleeve from his forearm, then looked around for something. Picking up a metal nail-file from the table, he pressed it against the skin on the underside of his arm, then tore an incision into the skin.

Urs cried out in alarm when she saw what he was doing, but he dropped the nail-file to the floor, then reached up a hand to touch her cheek. She met his eyes again, giving the barest shake of her head—no, she didn't want it.

"It's a gift," he explained, his voice low. "I want you to understand. I want you to *know*."

She hesitated only a moment, her eyes still holding his, then Urs lowered her lips to his arm, sucking at the ragged wound. Nick winced at the sudden pressure and the drawing of blood, but then the pain was gone. He felt her licking at the flesh around the wound, trying to seal it, to help him heal. Then, she lifted her eyes to him and moved closer, her lips meeting his in a chaste, if bloody kiss. As he cradled the wounded arm to his chest, she leaned against his shoulder momentarily, whispering, "It's all right—I forgive you."

He slid the shirt back down his arm again and refastened the button. She'd tasted his guilt, his remorse at having hurt her, his acceptance of the blame and his frustration at not knowing how to mend what he'd done. It was as much of a parting as his could manage, words still failing when compared to the blood, to the emotions and feelings it contained. Turning his head and catching her chin with his hand, he kissed her again, this time thoroughly and completely, an apology and appreciation for the goodness of her heart, the grandness of her spirit, and the beauty of her flesh.

Nick couldn't look at her after that. He rose from the bed and walked to the door, then closed it behind himself, knowing that this moment, too, would be in her memories. Let LaCroix make of it what he would.

He wandered upstairs, back to the club, rubbing his arm beneath his shirt. The flesh had already healed but the pain lingered for a moment or two longer. He could never completely make amends for what he'd done to Urs, but at least the blood would be the basis for an understanding between them. He might salvage her friendship and, perhaps, there was still a portion of her soul that might believe that he meant what he had said about her deserving better than what she'd expected or been given in the past.

If only his problem with Natalie could be solved so easily! What was he going to do? What could he tell her, if anything? She respected his wishes just as he attempted to respect hers, so that if she seemed interested and he put her off, she wouldn't question him . . . perhaps for a week or two. But he had a feeling that it wouldn't be enough. Complete abstinence from blood might help, but it would also weaken him. When the hunger grew frustrated enough, instinct would take over and who knew what could happen?

After the silence of the rooms beneath the building, the noise of the club was nearly deafening. Nick paused in the doorway to the back rooms and gave a nervous glance toward the door to LaCroix's office. He had no wish to encounter his master at the moment. He didn't see LaCroix and trying to sense his whereabouts would bring him to his master's attention—something he wanted to avoid. His best and only recourse was to head for the door and hope that he wouldn't be intercepted.

His luck held until he was almost past the bar. LaCroix was suddenly beside him, looping his elbow through Nick's arm and holding him in place. "Can I interest you in a drink?" Then LaCroix pushed him gently toward the bar, adding, "Or have you already had your fill, on the house?"

He straightened, made a futile attempt to pull away, but LaCroix held firm. Nick stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge his master's presence. If his master was ignored, if he got bored, he'd wander away. It had happened before.

It wasn't about to happen now. Releasing his arm, LaCroix walked around him. "Urs *is* lovely, isn't she? Fragile, delicate . . . broken. In a way, she reminds me of you."

"Does she?" Too late, he remembered that he wasn't going to speak, that he wasn't going to reply to LaCroix's taunts or barbs.

"Yes."

Nick looked away when LaCroix smiled, seeing the victory in his master's expression. He'd been pushed and allowed it to show. LaCroix stopped circling him and stood before him.

"She needs a firmer hand than she's had. Vachon doesn't know what to do with her."

"And you do?"

"We understand one another. I find her charming. And she finds me . . . ."

"Repulsive?" offered Nick, when LaCroix paused to search for a word.

There was no reaction. "Supportive," replied LaCroix, without missing a beat. He dropped his gaze for a moment, then tilted his head and met Nick's eyes. "You'll have to deal with Vachon about this."

He swallowed, suddenly realizing that LaCroix was right—Vachon wouldn't be happy about what he'd done to Urs.

"He plays the role of the absent parent to perfection, but he's rather protective about her. He doesn't like to see her hurt," warned LaCroix.

"I'll take care of it." Nick stared straight ahead, past LaCroix's shoulder.

"In your fashion, I know that you think you will. But if there are any repercussions, if it moves beyond your capacity to deal with the situation properly—"

"I'll take care of it," he repeated sharply, forcing himself to meet LaCroix's gaze.

"No," said LaCroix, "you won't. You never do. You'll refuse to act quickly and decisively, let things get beyond your ability to contain them, and then you'll come to me." The smile was faint, anything but reassuring. "You know where to find me."

It was a dismissal. Biting back his sigh of relief, Nick started to walk past LaCroix, his eyes focused on the stairway to the door. Just a hundred feet, if that—

But then LaCroix placed a hand on his shoulder, freezing him in his tracks again. "Have you ever wondered, Nicholas," he asked quietly, "why I made that agreement with your lovely doctor?"

Nick froze, a chill running down his spine. He turned his head slowly and met LaCroix's gaze, not daring to move or to answer.

"It was because I knew that you'd act true to form, just as you always have." The smile disappeared. "You can never be happy. You'll never *allow* yourself to be happy, no matter whom it might hurt. The guilt you carry will destroy you and everyone around you—you've created a self-fulfilling prophecy. I let you play this through to the end on your own because I knew this would happen. This time, Nicholas, you've no one to blame but yourself. Remember that, when you tell her. Because you will. You have no other choice." The smile returned, flickering briefly for a moment. "Such a loyal, trusting soul, your Dr. Lambert. She *is* too good for you, you know."

He almost fell when LaCroix released him, the words echoing in his brain. He wanted to scream at LaCroix, to shake him, to fight him, to draw blood and trash the place.

But it wouldn't change the truth—LaCroix was right. He'd been weak and stupid, betraying not only Natalie, but himself. LaCroix had kept his word, he'd done nothing to hurt Natalie. He'd left that to Nick.

What a brilliant job they'd both done.

He walked out of the Raven like an automaton, heading for the car, starting the engine, driving back to the loft—all on automatic pilot. The scent of Urs remained with him, near, but tantalizingly just beyond his reach. He rolled down the window to distract himself from the spent lust that lingered, but the fresh air did little to alleviate the miasma of memory. Still, he decided upon a shower as soon as he returned to the loft, taking some comfort in the fact that he'd at least chosen an evening when he was off from work to wreck the rest of his life.

Only the barest of lights were burning when he'd left and those were still on at his return to the loft. The elevator door thumped closed behind him and he lingered on the lower floor just long enough to raise the shutters that saved him from the burning light of day, before heading upstairs. The evening was still young, but he had no plans beyond his shower, a glass of cow blood, and several hours of brooding in solitude, with the shades open to the night and the lights extinguished so that he could let the starlight share in his solitary dungeon.

He stripped off his shirt and T-shirt as he climbed the stairs, draping them on a chair in his bedroom when he collected a pair of black silk pajamas from the closet. Nick pulled a terrycloth bathrobe from a hanger, pausing for a moment and smiling at the sight of the silk lounging robe Natalie was always cautioning him never to wear after a shower. He'd taken such things for granted, becoming used to a disposable society far earlier than the population of the modern century. He'd learned early in his existence that there was little with which he surrounded himself that couldn't be easily replaced, given money and effort enough. Everything was disposable.

And every*one*?

His fist tightened around the terrycloth of the bathrobe as he headed for

the shower—Natalie's scent rose from it. She'd worn it once or twice since he'd last had it washed, having made a habit of dropping by after work.

It pained him to think of her, but he had little choice—brushing her from his mind became impossible once he entered the bathroom. There was a cup and toothbrush on the sink that she'd left after he'd scolded her about the silliness of carrying one in her purse. Her hair shampoo sat on the holder in the shower beside his own brand and her deodorant was sitting in the medicine cabinet of the downstairs bathroom. She had, without realizing it, become a very integral part of his life.

Which he'd destroyed.

Hanging the robe and pajamas over the hook on the back of the bathroom door, Nick exhaled in a sigh. He unfastened the button and zipper of his jeans, let them slide to the floor, then stepped out of them and into the shower. He turned on the water, forcing himself not to flinch as he was blasted by a heavy spray of icy water. Closing his eyes, he leaned into the chill, accepting and relishing the discomfort of it until it gradually began to warm. Nick ducked his head, letting the water run through his hair and down his back, turning as the temperature grew hot and then hotter still, nearly scalding.

But he relished that, too, perhaps even more than the cold. It would have burned mortal flesh; he could feel the pain of it even through his temperature-resistant senses, but he could bear it. He wasn't mortal. He didn't deserve to be mortal. So he could afford to endure the discomforts a mortal could not. It gave him perspective, focus, distraction—

What was he going to do? What could he say?

Nick reached for the soap and rubbed it between his palms absently, considering the problem. It's possible he could say nothing. He might be magnifying the problem. He could still spend time with Natalie, be attentive to her . . . he only had to avoid any sexual situations. She wouldn't press him if he declined and he could beg off on some pretext or another for a while. He'd begin to test his own limits slowly, waiting until he felt safe with her again. She would never have to know that he'd broken faith with her.

Unless . . . she was told by someone else? Urs wouldn't say anything, but LaCroix might. Nothing overt, he was certain, but something to unsettle her. It seemed petty, beneath LaCroix's standards, but it was possible. He'd have to guard against that.

He found his fears diminishing as the spray and the soap washed the scent of his earlier escapade from his flesh. He rubbed the lather across his chest and shoulders, then down his groin, the water sluicing the soap away as fast as it could be applied. Even if LaCroix contacted Natalie, she wouldn't believe his word against Nick's. He wouldn't have to tell her anything, he was almost certain of it. In fact, if it ever happened again—not that he intended that it should or would—he'd know what to expect afterward, how long it would take him to regain his self-control. LaCroix was over-stating the case to make a point. Yes, he'd been unfaithful, but it had happened and he was sorry. Why hurt Natalie further by telling her about the episode? Better to let it rest, to bury the thing and go on from here.

By the time he'd exited the shower, had patted himself dry and slipped into his pajamas and his robe, Nick was in a far better mood. The dark cloud that he'd carried in his heart had all but lifted from him and he found himself grinning as he took a towel on his exit from the bathroom, rubbing it through his hair to shake out the remnants of water. His relationship with Natalie could weather this one accident on his part. No one had been hurt, really—Urs would heal and had forgiven him. As long as Natalie didn't find out—

He was walking down the staircase, still rubbing the towel through his hair, when he heard the elevator door open. Natalie stepped into view and, catching sight of him, gave a wan smile. She looked tired and more than a little shopworn, her shoulders sagging under the weight of the shift she'd just gotten through.

"Just stopped off on my way home," she offered. "I had a lousy day and I need some down time before I go home and take it out on Sydney. I thought we might go out to a movie or something, if you don't have any other plans . . . ?"

The sight of her had all but stopped him in his tracks and he absently let his hands fall to his side, the damp towel still clutched in his fist. There was a moment of discovery that visited him upon seeing her, the way a man who has seen flowers and knows them from life or memory can still be astonished and delighted by holding a rose in his hand and smelling the sweetness of its perfume. Knowledge of a thing was pale compared to the immediacy of its presence.

The affection he felt for Natalie, the joy that rushed through him on seeing her—rumpled and weary though she might be—surprised him momentarily. He wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms, to feel the heat of her mortal body, the touch of her lips, the sound of her heart as it beat for him.

Action followed thought. The towel was left discarded on the stair railing as he moved faster than Natalie could follow, hugging her against him, holding her tightly. He closed his eyes and reveled in the warmth he felt from her, the fire she stirred within his soul.

She seemed as astonished as he was at his sudden ardor, gasping, but returning the hug and drawing back with a light chuckle. "Or," she said, after a moment, "we could just stay in?"

"I'd like that." Nick kissed her nose, and then her forehead, pulling her against him again. His skin was chilled from the shower, the heat of the water couldn't hope to warm him as she seemed to. His plan to keep her at arm's length dissolved as he held her in his arms.

Then Natalie pushed him back again and shrugged out of his grip. She unbuttoned her suit jacket and hung it on a hook, complaining lightly, "I think you need to dry off. You look like a wet sheepdog."

He grinned and shook his head, disappointed that his drying hair didn't scattered water as he'd intended. "I can get dressed, if you really want to go out?"

"No—don't bother." Returning, she ducked beneath his arm, letting him escort her to the couch. "I think I need to just kick back a little."

"Rough day?" he asked sympathetically, plopping down beside her.

Natalie let out a low groan as she leaned back into the leather of the couch, then kicked off her shoes and rested her stocking-clad feet on the coffee table. "No bodies—just budgets. Although you'll be happy to know that Corrigan *was* killed with the same forty-five that killed Ray Eppes two months ago."

"Then I was right?"

"You were right," she admitted, then reached up a finger to touch his nose lightly. "But I'd appreciate it if you didn't look so smug."

"I'll try to turn down the smug level."

"Thanks."

"But I *was* right—"

"You—!" Natalie looked around for something to hit him with, but lacking any weaponry, punched his shoulder lightly with her fist—then winced when she caught the bone with her knuckle. "Ow."

"Serves you right, attacking an unarmed man."

"Unarmed? In a pig's eye!"

Nick moved closer to her and shifted her on the couch, so that her back was toward him. She moved beneath his touch and his hands went to the muscles of her neck and shoulders, massaging lightly. "Believe me, I'm completely defenseless."

"Good thing, too—-oooo," she moaned, as he deftly pushed the knots out of a stubborn shoulder muscle, "because if you keep this up, I'm definitely going to attack you."

"Promises, promises." He moved closer to her, one knee up alongside her and the other leg hanging off the couch, his foot resting on the floor. Molding himself around her, he undid the uppermost buttons of her blouse, then eased it down over the top of her shoulders so he could work directly on her flesh, unhampered by the clothing. Her shivers and occasional wriggles of contentment, as well as the loosening of her muscles beneath his fingers, told him that he was definitely following the correct course of action. Leaning forward, he caught a whiff of her and inhaled—mortal smells of shampoo and sweat and the chemicals she'd been into a dozen times that day, augmenting the deeper, more enticing scent of her blood.

She turned her head as he rested his nose in her hair. "What?"

"You smell great."

"I stink. But I was just thinking the same thing about you."

His hands stilled in mock-protest. "That I stink?"

"No, that you smell great. All clean and new. And don't stop that, please, or I'll have to take drastic action—you're the best thing that's happened to me all night."

Nick removed his hands from her shoulders, as if refusing to be cowed by her threat. "How drastic *is* drastic?"

Natalie turned, getting her legs beneath her so that she was kneeling on the couch. She leaned forward and placed her arms around his neck, murmuring, "How drastic do you want?" before letting her lips meet his.

She was warm and soft against him. His hands moved to her waist to draw her even closer as her lips opened. However weary she might have been when she'd entered the loft, there was nothing but passion in the way she kissed him—what choice did he have but to return the kiss in kind?

His body was also responding: to the heat of Natalie's body pressed against his, to the warmth of her flesh, to the scent of the blood that ran through her veins, to the play of her tongue within his mouth and her hands as they roamed down this ribs, one resting at the string tie at the forefront of his pajama bottoms. For a moment, he thought he might be able to do this. Awash in his passion for her and his amazement, still, that she could love him despite knowing who and what he was, Nick believed that could actually control the vampire within himself.

He nibbled at the corner of her mouth and licked the line of her jaw, down to her throat. Her skin was warm against his cool lips and he felt her body shiver against him, her fingers undoing the tie. The thought of her warm hands upon his shaft drew a moan from him and he pressed his lips against the naked skin of her neck and shoulders.

The beast within him roared up, red and angry and hungry for blood and his fangs dropped into position. Nick ran his tongue along the curve of her neck, the taste of her sweat giving him a preview of her blood. Just a bite, just a taste and he'd be fine. The hunger would go away and they'd be fine. He could still have her. He could still have—

With a roar, he pushed Natalie back from him, then threw himself from

the couch and to the floor. He scrambled back from the couch, then fought his way to his feet and launched himself toward the refrigerator. Half-stumbling, nearly falling, Nick concentrated on the blood that was close at hand. The alternative was Natalie, warm and scented and fresh and . . . better to settle for cold bottled cow.

He opened the door, pulled out a bottle, bit out the cork, and began to drink. At some point he realized that Natalie was standing beside him, a hand's span away. He lowered the bottle from his lips long enough to growl, "Get back!" at her, before drinking again.

He didn't need the blood. It was the beast, the beast within him that wanted him to hurt Natalie, to kill her.

"Nick? Are you all right?"

He closed his eyes, the concern in her voice cutting through his heart like a rusty saw. He sucked the last few droplets of blood from the lip of the bottle, then let his arm fall back to his side and leaned his cheek against the the cool metal of the closed refrigerator door. "Yeah," he said, after a long pause, the word rough-edged with his interrupted passion. For now, the beast was appeased, but not sated. It lingered in the middle of his soul, roaming back and forth like a lonely sentinel, ready and waiting for another opportunity.

"I'm—I'm sorry."

He stared up at her, the bottle falling from his hand. "Sorry?" he asked in bewilderment, his heart tearing further at the sight of her.

Natalie brushed back her hair and then bit her lip, her distress evident. "I just dropped in on you. I didn't think about—you hadn't fed yet. This is my fault. I shouldn't have pushed you into this."

"You haven't pushed me into anything. This is *not* your fault."

"It is—"

"It isn't." Before he could think about what he was doing, he walked over to her and took her into his arms. For a long moment, he simply held her close against him.

He felt the beast stirring within him, the watchful hunger become alert and he pushed Natalie back gently. Folding his arms and holding them tightly to his chest, he turned away from her. "It isn't your fault. It's mine."

"I surprised you."

He felt the warmth of her palm against his back even through the terrycloth of the bathrobe. The sensation shot through him like electricity, spreading to his brain, his heart, his groin . . . .

Nick took a step forward, needing to put distance between them. "That's not the problem. It's the blood. I can't—I can't—"

The words weren't going to be easy. Thankfully Natalie had gotten the hint—he heard her move across the room, to the windows. Only then did he let his shoulders relax, almost sighing in relief.

"You've had human blood?"

It was a good guess—enough of a good guess to surprise him. He could use that as an excuse, lie to her, pass it off as a lapse in judgment.

No more lies. It *was* a lapse in judgment.

"Vampire blood."

The admission wasn't any more freeing—the weight of what he'd done was still heavy on his heart. He was going to hurt her now. That's the last think he wanted. If he lied, he wouldn't hurt her . . . now.

Only later, when she found out the truth. Because Natalie *would* find out the truth. No matter what he did, she'd get hurt.

It was for the best. This hurt she could survive. This hurt she could—

"Janette?" she asked.

He smiled at the thought and shook his head, able to answer this question with true innocence. "No. Not Janette. I haven't seen her since . . . ." Shrugging, he turned to face her. "It wasn't Janette."

A mistake—turning. Now he could see the hurt in her face, in her eyes, no matter how much she was pretending that it wasn't there. She bit her lip again and looked away, the muscles of her neck taut like wire. Then there was a moment of hesitation on her part, veiled surprise. "Not . . . LaCroix?"

Another chance. Nick straightened and let his arms fall to his sides, fists clenching. LaCroix was a good excuse—she knew the relationship between them. To say he'd been forced, to say—

A lie. No more lies.

He managed a faint smile as he shook his head sadly. "Not LaCroix. Believe me, *not* LaCroix."

"Someone . . . else, then? Someone I know?" Her question ended on a high pitch. Natalie inspected her fingernails.

He couldn't bear to look at her, but forced himself to walk to the table behind the couch. His watch was in that box on the table, the watch that she'd given him. "Does it matter?" he asked softly.

"No. No, I suppose it doesn't. Maybe it's better I don't know. What is it they say, 'Curiosity killed the cat?' I guess they'd got that right."

Finally, she met his eyes. The hurt was in full blossom. It was as if she knew . . . everything. All that had happened. How could he have thought to hide this from her? How could he have believed that it wouldn't matter? He'd saved her life by pulling back. Had he now killed her love for him by telling her the truth?

Words eluded him, the best he could manage was a heartfelt, "I'm sorry."

"You're . . . sorry." Natalie clapped her palms together once and nodded, as if thinking over the words, walking past him. "You're sorry. Well, *I'm* sorry. I'm sorry I came here tonight. I'm sorry I ever trusted you—"

She'd turned to walk out, heading straight for the elevator, her bag and jacket forgotten. He grabbed her arm, stopping her. "Nat, don't—"

"Don't you *dare* touch me!" Natalie wrenched her arm away from him and backed up a step, hazel eyes angry—the tears were there but she was too proud to let them go. Her skin was flushed red with anger, her blood rising, boiling . . . calling out to him. "You were going to try to get away with it, weren't you? You were just going to pretend it had never happened. When *did* this happen? Sunday night? Last night?"

He licked his lips, the scent of her blood intoxicating, answering, "A few hours ago," without even thinking about what he was saying.

"A few hours ago—?"

Dumbstruck, Natalie stared at him with a look so appalled that it actually reached through his hunger and opened his heart to shame. Nick made his way back to the couch. Seating himself, he placed his head in his hands. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I don't know what else to say. I wasn't thinking. I was—Nat, I am *so* sorry. Even LaCroix said you were too good for me. He was right." He lifted his head long enough to glance back at her. "It's my fault. It's all my fault."

For some reason, he had the impression that she was studying him. Then Natalie walked toward the chair to one side of the couch. She sat down onto it as if it might break beneath her, then absently fixed the collar of her shirt, rebuttoning it. "There's a chance," she said slowly, "that this isn't *all* your fault. We both know that any physical relationship between us has . . . limitations. For both of us. It must be different for you—for vampires." When he opened his mouth to answer, she held up a hand, stopping him. "You hold back—I can feel it. Sometimes it scares me. You could break me in half without thinking about it. There's a possibility that I can't . . . that I can't give you what you need."

Her voice was steady, calm, clinical, but her eyes betrayed her—her eyes were swimming with hurt, with pain. He could drown in those eyes so easily. Reaching across to grab her hand, he said, "You're all I need."

"Obviously, I'm not." She shook his hand from her own with a single movement, a bitter smile twisting her lips. One tear escaped her eyes, but she brushed it away quickly. "This could—this could be important. To your cure. Tell me about what happened."

"Tell you—?" It was his turn to stare, not quite understanding. "Tell you what?"

"Everything." Natalie clasped her hands together and met his stare with a level gaze. The hurt was still there, but swallowed by something else, a clinical professionalism.

He felt uncomfortably like a germ on a microscope slide. "*Everything*?"

"Everything," she repeated. "What happened between you, how she touched you, what you did . . . everything. I need to know what happened and why it happened." She lowered her gaze to the carpet and asked, "How did it start?"

Nick hesitated for a moment, remembering how he'd taken Urs' hand in his to lead her from the vampire grunge-stud, their dance, her comment that he was too 'good.'

But that wasn't what Natalie wanted to hear, that wasn't what she was asking. It was the physicality that mattered to her at the moment, his salvation lying in the possibility that there was something in vampire sex that he couldn't share with Natalie. Slowly, he licked his lips, then cleared his throat and said, "With fellatio. That's how it . . . started."

She nodded once, but he heard Natalie's heart beat in quick succession—she'd offered to perform fellatio on him twice now, but he hadn't trusted himself with her either time. The sensations were so consuming, he thought he might lose control of himself and kill her.

He hadn't bitten Urs, had he, though?

"I didn't ask—she just . . . ." Words were abandoning him with fearful rapidity. He stared at Natalie, wanting to make her understand, but she wouldn't look at him, her gaze centered on the floor.

"What was it like? What did it feel like?"

The memory of Urs' cool mouth drifting along the length of his member began a warm glow within him. "Cool. Soft. Like . . . I don't know what." He cleared his throat, realizing that thinking about the event was tantamount to reliving it, with Urs' blood still running through his system. As he closed his eyes, he could remember the intensity of it, the power as he held her head and slammed himself into the depths of her mouth, her tongue and teeth tracing finely along his skin each time he withdrew. The wonderful wet suction . . . .

Opening his eyes, Nick realized that his pajamas were uncomfortably tight at the front. He shifted his position to give his rising shaft more room, then looked at Natalie. She was watching him.

"Did you take blood from her? Or did she take blood from you?"

"Not then. Neither of us took blood."

"And you climaxed? Ejaculated?"

Clinical, precise, and—oddly enough—very arousing. Nick took a slow breath, trying to ignore the sensations running through him. "Yes."

"Was there blood in the semen?"

"I don't think so. I mean . . . she said there wasn't. She thought there was something wrong." He cleared his throat again and shrugged. "I told her it was the cow blood." He hesitated again, wondering why he was going through this.

Because she might forgive him. Because she might understand and forgive him and not shut him out entirely. He'd destroyed what they'd had before—he knew that. But not everything. To lose her completely would be too—

"Then you had intercourse?"

Nick licked his lips again, thinking of how his best intentions had gone so horribly wrong. "Yes. But . . . something happened."

"What?"

There was an eagerness in Natalie's eyes that had nothing to do with prurient interest. It gave him hope.

"I tasted blood. My blood. We kissed—there were fangs, we drew blood. Then it took control of me—the bloodlust. I didn't want it like that. I didn't want it to be like that."

"Like what?" Natalie's voice was softer. "What happened?"

"It was rough." He turned his gaze to the fireplace, to the dragon along the mantle. The vagueness in Urs' eyes still haunted him, the way she'd shut herself off, had gone away when he'd gotten out of hand. "I hurt her. I didn't want to. I never wanted to . . . ."

"You would have hurt me?"

"I would have killed you." He let the truth hang in the air between them for a moment, glancing at her, then looking away again. "I took her blood. She took mine."

"Did you climax before or after you took her blood?"

"After."

"And now you can't control it? You can't control the vampire when we're together?"

That was it. This was the final time he could lie. The lie wouldn't just hurt her, it would kill her.

No more lies.

"I don't think I can," he answered quietly. "Not right now. In time, maybe. If I get back to cow, abstain for a while. The chains might . . . ."

He suddenly realized that Natalie had risen from the chair and was heading for her bag and jacket. He turned to follow her progress with his eyes, not certain what her intentions might be. Of course she was leaving, but . . . for good? "Nat?"

She looped the strap of her handbag over her arm, then stopped, her back toward him. "I wanted to make sure it wasn't a vampire thing, something I hadn't allowed for. From what you're telling me . . . I don't think it was chemical or physiological. I could run some tests but—well, to tell you the truth, I don't really feel like it."

He was on his feet and beside her in an instant. Nick tried to take her into his arms, but she pulled away, eyes wary.

"I've hurt you," he said carefully.

"You're damn right you hurt me." Her brow furrowed and she brushed her hair out of her face with an annoyed gesture, but her gaze never left his, angry and alert. "I thought we meant something. I thought I meant something to you."

"You do. You mean everything—"

"And that's why you slept with somebody else?" When he turned away from her, she followed, adding, "If it was just the blood, you could have taken it without sex. We both know that. The sex was the basis of this. You made a decision to sleep with someone else."

Nick turned, nearly catching her in his arms, but she stepped back again. "I didn't think—"

"No, you *didn't*."

Her eyes were sharp and angry, tears glistening at the corners again. He couldn't bear to look at them but forced himself not to look away. "I never meant to hurt you. I know what it would feel like if you did this to me—slept with someone else." Hesitating, he shrugged. "Maybe you *should*. Maybe you should find someone and—"

"You want me to go out and have an affair? So we can be even?" She stared at him in astonishment. "This isn't a game, Nick. This is us. This is life. Either we win or we lose, together. There's only one side, our side. This isn't high school. We're supposed to be adults. Maybe you should start acting like one. Maybe you should—" Natalie stopped in mid-sentence, then reached out a hand to touch his own, her expression sad. "I think I know why you did this. You were happy. I *know* you were happy. But you can't *be* happy, can you, Nick? You've got all that guilt bottled up inside you, all that pain. So when something good does happen to you, you find a way to screw it up so that you can be unhappy again."

"I have, haven't I?" He caught her hand with his and raised her fingers to his lips, kissing the tips gently. "I've screwed this up. I've hurt you."

"Yes, you have." She pulled her hand from his grasp, slowly, then cradled it to her chest. "Look, I've gotta go. Do me a favor and don't call, okay? Not for . . . not for a while. If you need something from the office, have Tracy get it for you."

He heard the words and understood them, but it was as if they were spoken at a distance. Somewhere inside he was too busy watching his world come tumbling down around him. "It can't end like this."

"It was your choice, not mine." Natalie walked to the elevator and opened the door.

There wasn't any sense in moving slowly—he was there almost before she was. Holding the door open for her, he said, "We've done the impossible. Nat, we can't let this go. Not now. It means too much, to both of us. After all we went through, all *you* went through . . . ."

"I can't deal with this right now, okay?" Her voice was taut and she stared up at him, eyes wide. "Just . . . don't call me, don't try to contact me."

"This can't be good-bye."

"It might be." She closed her eyes and stepped back into the elevator. "I'll let you know."

The door slammed shut and he moved back, his nerves dulled. Nick leaned on the brick wall beside the elevator for a moment and closed his eyes.

It was better this way. Natalie was alive—he hadn't killed her and he hadn't lied to her. She'd be free of him, free to live her own life without him placing her in danger. She'd be better off without him.

For an instant or two, he tried to believe that, tried to pretend that it was all for the best. Walking to the refrigerator, he pulled out another bottle of blood and returned to the couch. The shutters on the windows were opened to the evening sky. He drank the blood and stared out at the night, wondering what he could do, now that she was gone. He'd only returned to Toronto a short time before he'd run into her, before she'd helped him shape his life here. She'd been part of this life from the start.

He'd screwed it up. He'd been scared of being happy—she was right in that he didn't feel he deserved to be happy. So he'd found a dozen different excuses as to why this shouldn't work, added the appropriate stupid action and window dressing, and now he was back to where he'd tried to be—alone and unhappy. Already, he missed her. He needed her. He wanted her.

He loved her.

A few more flicks on his remote control from the table and he turned off all the lights in the loft. Sitting in the darkness in his robe and pajamas, his body letting him know in no uncertain terms that it was *very* unhappy about being partially aroused and then ignored, Nick slowly sipped at the bottle of cow blood and thought about what he could do to make Natalie a part of his life again.

To Err Is Human

The needle sliced through skin, once, then twice, then again. Despite the smells of stale blood, antiseptic, and that old-meat stench that always accompanied the bodies in the lab no matter how fresh they were, Natalie caught a whiff of the victim's cologne.

It reminded her of Nick. But then, she decided—slipping the needle through the skin of the corpse again—that there were a lot of things that reminded her of Nick. Not all of them were good, but they were proving equally distracting in their own ways.

The first week since she and Nick had officially ceased being an 'item' hadn't been that bad—for her. Nick kept his word and hadn't called her, had sent Tracy for any lab information, and had barely spoken to her at crime scenes if they'd happened to bump into one another. His attitude when they did run into one another over a corpse gave her more than a clue that his behavior must be anything but satisfactory toward the rest of his co-workers. He was curt and if he managed more than three words to her, he added nasty to his sullen repertoire for the evening.

She guessed it was the whole ego thing, that if he pretended to himself that their break up was his decision and not hers, it would be easier for him to handle. Actually, she didn't mind him feeling that way because it took some of the pressure off her. Not having to deal with him meant that she wouldn't have to think about him . . . or that's what she'd told herself.

Natalie continued sewing up the chest incision on the gunshot victim—definitely a closed-casket funeral—when she felt an x-ray beam settle somewhere between her eyes. She looked up to find Grace staring at her over the body, then glanced down again, wondering if in her distracted state she'd managed to sew up one or two of her instruments inside the deceased's chest cavity.

"What?" she'd asked, after noticing that her stitching was just a little on the wobbly side that evening.

Grace was still staring at her, frowning. "Do you know who she was?"

Natalie matched the stare, now thoroughly confused as the gunshot victim

was, the last time she'd checked beneath the sheet covering the corpse, *most* definitely male. "What are you talking about?"

"The girl you caught Nick sleeping with. Do you know who she was?"

Natalie's heart stopped somewhere in the middle of the Grace's sentence. She licked her lips behind the protective surgical mask and wondered if she should try to bluff her way out. Grace's lines of communication were legendary. To pretend ignorance would only make Grace suspicious and cause her to dig deeper, which might prove dangerous not only for Grace but for the vampire community in Toronto. She didn't want anyone else getting hurt because of this.

Oddly enough, she found herself including Nick in that category. Although it would be fair to admit that she wouldn't mind seeing him bruised around the edges a bit.

"I don't know." Natalie looked down at the neat edge of the scalpel cut she was sewing, pinched the skin together with her fingers, and tried to concentrate. "I don't want to know."

"But that's it, isn't it? You caught him with somebody else?"

She paused again, glad that the surgical mask hid her slight smile—she could almost hear the drool, Grace was definitely eager for details. Taking that moment to tie off the sewn section, Natalie picked up a pair of surgical scissors and snipped the end of the thread. "Well, I didn't *catch* him—"

"But he left clues? Lipstick. Phone calls. Motel receipts." Grace shook her head. "You'd think they'd get brighter, especially the detectives. Sometimes I think they *want* to get caught running around."

"Actually—" Natalie cleared her throat and put the scissors back down on the tray. "He wasn't running around. It only happened once."

"Uh-huh." Grace's nod was anything but believing. "So you caught him and he admitted that he'd been sleeping around, but he claims it only happened once, huh?"

"I didn't *catch* him. He told me . . . he told me that he'd slept with someone else."

"He *told* you?"

"That's what I said." Natalie drew the sheet over the head and chest of the corpse and pushed the trolley to one side, aware that Grace was hot on her heels.

"No torture, no confrontation with a pair of frilly panties that you'd never bought and sure as shaking didn't remember wearing . . . and he actually *told* you that he'd stepped out on you?"

Natalie snapped off the latex gloves from her hands, tossing then directly into the disposal, then glanced over her shoulder. "You're shocked."

"More like disappointed." Grace had removed her own gloves, her voice becoming more distinct as she untied the surgical mask and set it to one side. "That's the only good thing about something like that—you can build up one hell of a head of steam when you've got the evidence AND moral outrage on your side." She rested a hand on Natalie's shoulder as Natalie removed her own surgical mask. "You told him to hit the road, right?" When Natalie didn't answer immediately, she moved closer and repeated, "Right?"

"Yes," she said, in a small and quiet voice. Then, forcing a brave smile, she nodded and faced Grace. "Well, sort of. I told him that it might be over between us."

"*Might* be over between you?" Grace glared at her. "Girl, you can't tell me you'll ever be able to look yourself in the mirror if you go back to that man. If he's done you dirty once, he'll do it again."

"I didn't say I was going to give him another chance," said Natalie defensively. She turned on the faucet and thrust her hands beneath the water, then hit the soap dispenser.

"No, you didn't."

Her hands covered in lather, Natalie glanced over at Grace, her heart sinking at the disapproval she found in her friend's posture and expression. There was no way to explain to Grace what she and Nick had been through together, not just the vampire stuff over the past few years, but the history of their recent sexual relationship, starting with consenting pseudo-bondage, through that horrible night she'd made the deal with LaCroix, and past that, to the point where they'd meant something to one another, to the point where she'd actually been happy.

To the point where Nick had been happy.

Standing there, hands covered in soap, Natalie stared at her friend in dismay and realized for the hundredth time how truly trapped she was. She couldn't share everything with Grace. How could she expect Grace to do anything but condemn her for even thinking about continuing with Nick?

Then Grace's expression softened. She reached out and took Natalie's soapy hands between her own and squeezed them. "You still love him, don't you?"

She nodded, hesitantly, then shut her eyes, thankful that she had a friend who could see her heart without all of the trappings of experience that she couldn't share. Grace hugged her tightly and added, "It's okay."

"It's *not* okay," protested Natalie. She pushed back from Grace gently, laughed when she found then both covered with soapsuds, then rescued a paper towel to dry herself off. Sitting down in a chair beside her desk, she stared up

at Grace. "You're right—I'm out of my mind for even thinking about giving him a second chance. Nick made a decision to—to cheat. It was *his* decision."

"It was," agreed Grace. "Maybe that's the worst part of it; he made a choice that affected you, broke up something you were both a part of. You were owed a say in this and you didn't get it. Don't think you have to walk away cause that's the only choice you've got in this thing. Make sure if you're leaving, you're leaving because *you* want to leave, not because he drove you away." Then she paused and tilted her head slightly. "You *do* want to leave him, don't you?"

Natalie stared down at the tile floor, feeling lost. "I don't know. I don't know what I want to do."

"Then give it time, girl, give it time." She felt Grace's hand on her shoulder again. "It's for you to decide, not him. Let him sweat it out for a change. Never a met a man waiting didn't improve one way or another."

Natalie grimaced, then grinned up at Grace. "You said the same thing about a pint of double-double chocolate brownie fudge ice cream."

"I said that no man was worth a pint of that stuff. That's pure gold. If the minister would put a ring on one of those, I'd be walking down the aisle faster than you could say Haagen Daas." She took Natalie's hand, helped her to her feet, and added, "Now, c'mon, we've got two more customers to get through this shift."

With a groan, Natalie had let Grace pull her to her feet. She had a lot to think about and found herself falling into the routine of describing injuries, removing and weighing internal organs, and assigning various forensic tests and procedures to the samples she prepared for the lab. If she did forgive Nick, what then? In the state he was in now, he didn't act like he wanted to be forgiven . . . although she was pretty sure he was still in that wounded-ego part of the post break-up denial. If he were still interested, he'd start making overtures again.

If he did, and she took him back, what would that mean? A return to the relationship they'd managed to work out, after enough time had passed and he'd proven that he could control the vampire again? How long might that be? An involuntary shudder passed through her as she briefly considered using the restraints again, but she discarded that idea almost immediately. No, those memories were still too fresh and too painful.

Did it really matter how long it would take? They'd only go back to the same problem they'd had before—he was a vampire and she was mortal. All he had to do was lose his concentration once . . . and she would be dead. Even if they did manage to continue in the fashion to which they'd become accustomed, she was aging and he wasn't. They couldn't ignore that problem indefinitely. Would Nick still be as interested and as attentive when she started to really show her age? By taking him back now, wasn't she just setting herself up for certain heartache in the not-too-distant future?

Those thoughts plagued her as she finished up work that night, and for days afterward. The second week since the date of Nick's confession of his infidelity arrived . . . accompanied by flowers.

Lots and lots of flowers. And cards. And candy. And gifts, ranging from small, curio style folk-crafts, to toys for Sydney (love me, love my cat), to dress boxes from chic designers—the latter of which she wouldn't sign for and returned unopened. The trinkets she kept because she couldn't help it—they appeared on the front seat of her car, her computer keyboard or clipboard at work, even at her front door.

It was the one that she'd found just outside her apartment door that had startled her that afternoon. Natalie had turned to lock the door, looked down, and had seen the box there. Her breath had caught in her throat for a moment and she'd looked around, but it was mid-afternoon and Nick was no where to be seen. She'd picked up the box and opened it—it was a small plastic container filled with candy hearts. She smiled as she tipped them out into her hand, remembering how she'd teased him about not knowing that childhood custom. After a moment, she realized that the one on top said, 'Forgive me?'

As did the one beneath it and the one beneath that. Nick must have purchased several pounds of the things and picked out just that phrase. Natalie smiled at the thought of him distastefully picking his way through bags of the stuff, knowing how the sweet smell of the candy must have turned his vampire-oriented stomach. It was a small concession, but it was still a concession.

Tipping the candy back into the plastic container and closing it, she shoved it quickly into her purse and finished locking up. She couldn't bear to think about that. But it did make her wonder what he'd done with the rest of the candy. Thrown it out, probably. Or given it to children.

Nick didn't know any children—his only continued contact had been with Schanke's daughter, Jenny. When Schanke had been killed and Myra had taken Jenny to her family's place to start their lives anew, he'd lost even that small contact with such an important part of mortal life.

As she drove into work, Natalie thought of the times she'd seen Nick around children—when he'd cared for Lisa, their witness in that mob hit, or when he'd been shanghaied into helping Jenny shop for a present for Schanke's birthday. She'd watched him watching Jenny, laughed behind her smile at his befuddlement at Jenny's insistence that the tie have ducks on it, but a special kind of duck, merely shrugged when he'd turned bewildered eyes to her for assistance and, at the checkout, had wondered where his memories

took him, a distant look in his eyes as Jenny chattered happily about ties and ducks and fathers.

He hadn't shared his thoughts with her and, at the time, she hadn't asked. Now, she continued to wonder. If she forgave Nick, if she relented and their lives returned to what they had recently become, intertwined but still separate, there was no hope for children. No real hope. Nick had seemed certain that he couldn't have children because it simply wasn't possible for male vampires to have mortal children. Paula, Dr. Corey, herself a vampire, had also believed this, but then she'd been surprised to find that they'd had complete sexual intercourse without Nick biting her and drinking her blood.

It might *just* be possible. She'd need some samples of sperm to test, but if the sperm was healthy, maybe with artificial insemination or in vitro . . . .

Pulling into a parking space in the morgue's underground lot, Natalie turned off the engine, then rested her arms and chin on the steering wheel. She must be crazy. She *was* crazy. Nick had cheated on her, obviously without a second thought to what it would mean to them, what it would do to her. Why on earth was she thinking about how she might possibly find a way for him to have a child?

Because she *did* still love him. She wanted, in her heart of hearts, to give him a second chance because there was still a part of her heart that wanted to spend her life with him, that wanted to *share* her life with him, work and children and growing old and everything. But life with Nick would mean that he wouldn't grow old—she would. And they couldn't have children together—not unless she managed to find a way to break how many centuries or millennia of vampire folklore and tradition and so many physical obstacles that she couldn't even begin to count them and—

They'd made part of it work. They shouldn't have, but it had happened. And it had kept happening, until Nick had done something so bone-headed and hurtful and completely, thoroughly dim-witted and . . . and typically mortal. He hadn't cheated on her because he was a vampire, he'd cheated on her because he was a regular person, with vices and virtues and flaws and all. Was she considering not taking him back because he *was* a vampire, because they couldn't have a house with a white picket fence and day jobs and 2.5 children and grow old together? Was she able to forgive him for his mortal faults, but not able to forgive him because there was no life for them, no picturesque and normal future?

With a sigh, Natalie shook off her gloomy thoughts and went into work, certain only that Nick's infidelity had raised a lot more questions than she had answers for. She spent the afternoon reading test results, writing reports, and cutting into bodies, half-dreading and half-anticipating the possibility that Nick would make an appearance on the pretext of picking up some evidence, despite her wishes to the contrary. She had no idea what she was going to tell him.

When the hall door opened and Tracy peered around it, Natalie dropped the pen onto her blotter and smiled up at her guest, relieved that Nick was maintaining the status quo by continuing to send his partner for their case results. "Here for the Silvestor report?" she asked.

Tracy gave her a hopeful look. "You have it done?"

"Toxicology came in fifteen minutes ago—I'm just finishing up the details." Natalie glanced down at the folder in front of her, signed her name at the bottom of the form, then turned the open folder around and held it up for Tracy's inspection. "Aneurysm. Mrs. Silvestor developed a blood clot in the brain—probably never knew what hit her."

Tracy took the folder from her and glanced down at it, then back up at Natalie. "So, the fact that she was coming down the staircase at the time was just dumb luck?"

"It wouldn't have mattered. The dumb luck was that her son was standing behind her. The fall didn't kill her—the blood clot in her brain did that almost immediately."

With a sigh and a smile, Tracy closed the folder and handed it back. "That's a relief. One less homicide for the books. I'll contact the family when I get back to the office. It's bad enough most killers are people you know, but when you've got a family member as a suspect and it might not even have been a murder—"

"Congratulations, you get to be the bearer of good tidings for a change."

"For a change, yeah," agreed Tracy, but her smile was half-hearted at best. "Actually, I *could* call Nick from here and have him phone it in, but . . . ."

Natalie kept her smile in place, but felt every muscle in her body tense at the mention of Nick's name. "He's been kind of tough to work with lately?"

"He's been a *bear*," complained Tracy. Glancing behind her, she found a wheeled chair by the counter, grabbed it, and then looked back at Natalie. "You got a minute?"

"Be my guest." Her heart stilled as Tracy pulled a chair up beside her desk, but Natalie pretended not to notice. "I guess that's partially my fault."

"Not from what *I've* heard—" But Tracy stopped in mid-sentence, her fair cheeks coloring slightly and she glanced away nervously. "I'm sorry."

"I understand." Natalie looked up at the door to the file room, where Grace was currently working, a wry smile creeping across her features. "I don't know why they bothered giving us e-mail—office gossip is a *lot* faster." Then she met Tracy's guilt-ridden gaze and smiled wanly, nudging Tracy's

shoulder with her fist. "It's okay. He's your partner. What goes between partners—I understand how close the relationship gets. What affects him, affects you."

"Actually, he affects everything," said Tracy unhappily. "When he was grumpy, he was roughing up the suspects a little, like he was on a hair-trigger. He seems to have gotten over that—" she shot a cautious glance at Natalie as if for confirmation, then looked away again, "but now it's like Nick can't keep his mind on what we're doing. We were at Eaton Center last night—"

Natalie nodded, looking toward the freezer out of habit, "The double shooting—two white males, late teens?"

"Right." Tracy shrugged, as if the information doesn't matter. "We're questioning the witnesses, and when I look up, Nick's gone. He's standing in front of a store display at the other side of the mall, one of those expensive boutiques. Before I have a chance to ask him what the hell he's doing and why he left me with all those witnesses—I should be used to him running off on me in the middle of a case by now, huh?—he looks over at me, points to this dress in the window and asks if I think that you'd like it. I mean, he asked if *you'd* like it."

"If *I'd* like—?"

Momentarily flustered, Tracy shook her head and sighed. "Natalie, whatever's going on between you two is none of my business, but what am I going to do with him? The captain wasn't happy with Nick's 'bad attitude,' but at least he got the work done. Now . . . I'm afraid to leave him alone cause I don't know if he's gonna wander off or—" Tracy's hopeless shrug spoke volumes. "I know you're the last person I should probably be asking, but I've got no one else. Nick's got a lot of friends, but not a lot of *close* friends. Any suggestions?"

Natalie drew in a long breath, partially to see if Tracy was finished and partially because she needed to take a second to regroup. "I . . . don't know what to tell you."

Tracy paused for a moment, nodded—her cheeks still more than a little red—and then rose to her feet, pushing back her chair in the process. "I guess I shouldn't have bothered you with this."

"No, it's all right." Natalie rose as well and caught Tracy's arm, stopping her as she moved to leave. "The fact is, we've—Nick and I—we're not exactly on good terms right now." She swallowed as Tracy's gaze met her own and felt her own cheeks color. "But I guess you'd figured that out, or heard as much. We've been using you as a go-between and I have to apologize for that—"

"It's not a—"

"It's wrong. Putting you in that position, between us, wasn't the right thing to do. It's just that I—" She walked past Tracy and over to the sink. Turning on the faucet, Natalie started to wash her hands. "I couldn't deal with seeing Nick. I've got some decisions to make and us working together doesn't make it any easier, but we've got no right to use you like this. This is our problem and we're making it yours."

"Actually, Nick's sort of been making it *everyone's* problem."

Natalie glanced over her shoulder at Tracy's admission, then laughed at the rueful expression she saw on Tracy's face. Turning off the faucet, she pulled down a paper towel and began to dry her hands. "Has he really been that bad?"

"He broke all the pencils in his pencil cup—I had to hide mine. They've called in maintenance to fix his typewriter and his computer keyboards. And you don't even want to know about—" Tracy hesitated, then smiled. "No. You probably don't."

Natalie smiled in response, because a part of her did want to know. She'd heard bits and pieces through the grapevine and there'd been oblique questions cast in her general direction, but she'd let Grace handle the information dispersal for the office. There was a part of her that was happy that he'd been miserable, another part that was horrified that he'd taken out his anger on his surroundings, and another part was relieved that he'd moved onto the reconciliation phase . . . even though it put more pressure on her. "Thanks," she said softly. Then she reached out and took Tracy's hand. "I'm got a couple of decisions to make. It won't be much longer. Until then . . . ?"

"You know, I'm really tempted to buy one of those elastic kiddie leashes to keep track of him. Maybe something in a fluorescent orange?" Tracy sighed, then squeezed Natalie's hand. "Thanks for the news on the Silvestor case. And . . . if you need a sympathetic ear?"

"I've got your cell phone number."

"Day or night," promised Tracy.

Natalie smiled again at the comment and the simple act of friendship. "Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

She stood there for a few minutes after Tracy left, then slowly folded herself into the chair Tracy had vacated and, pointing it backwards, leaned her chin on the top of the backrest. Maybe Grace was right in that she should take her time, but she couldn't just let this drag out. It wouldn't be fair to anyone, particularly herself. She had to make a decision.

They had two stabbings that evening, and a floater, but she managed to avoid Nick at all of the crime scenes, one being out of his jurisdiction. By the time her shift was over, she was physically and mentally exhausted. As she

walked across the empty garage back to her car, she shrugged off the odd feeling of being shadowed, chalking it up to the result of a long, busy shift.

Natalie opened her car door and was about to slip behind the wheel when a hand dropped on her shoulder. She whirled, lips parted, ready to scream 'Fire' at the top of her lungs—and also more than slightly aware that she was the last person from her shift to leave, the garage was empty and security wasn't due for another half hour.

"Dr. Lambert . . . I'm sorry." Vachon grinned, half embarrassed as he released his hold on her. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Natalie sagged back against the side of her car, swatted at him lightly with the back of her hand, and released a nervous chuckle. "Startle? That wasn't a startle, that was scaring ten years off my life! Don't you have anything better to do than sneak up on an unsuspecting mortal? You could have gotten maced. And I'm not certain you don't deserve it."

"Next time I'll wear bells," promised Vachon, with mock-sincerity.

"Or get one of those alarm systems they put on trucks so you know they're backing up." Taking a deep breath, Natalie shook her head. "Can I help you with something or is scaring unsuspecting coroners a sick form of vampire entertainment that no one's warned me about?"

"It's something new."

"Ah, that could be why." She swallowed. "I haven't seen Nick in a couple of weeks."

"I know." Vachon's expression was serious, almost deathly so. With a gesture toward the car, he asked, "Mind if I bum a ride?"

It was at least a couple of hours till dawn, Vachon's current digs—an abandoned church—were nowhere near her apartment, and she could say 'ditto' for the Raven. But, after a second's hesitation, Natalie grinned, still a bit nervous, and opened the driver's side door again. "Be my guest."

She fastened her seatbelt around her, closed the door, and inserted the key into the ignition as Vachon headed around the car and entered the passenger side. He closed the door and she waited for a moment. When he looked at her in question, one eye raised, she smiled. "Seatbelt? You may be indestructible, but I don't need the insurance hassles."

Vachon stared at her in disbelief, then, when he seemed to understand that she wasn't about to start the car without his compliance, he buckled the belt with a great show of discomfort and annoyance. "Seat belts, airbags . . . they're taking the fun out of these things, not making them any safer."

She opened her mouth to reply, then closed it again, deciding that it was better not to argue automotive safety when you had a vampire in the passenger seat. Starting the engine, Natalie backed the car out of the space and headed for the doors to that led out onto the street. "Where can I drop you?"

"I'll let you know."

"Just give me a one block warning, okay?" Feeling Vachon's gaze on her, she asked, "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Too late to file a flight plan?"

"Low cloud ceiling—too damp to fly."

Natalie glanced up through the windshield at the cloudless, star-filled, pre-dawn sky and her heart skipped a beat. "Yeah. I see what you mean." She cleared her throat. "Then this is a house call? Don't tell me I've become the vampire equivalent of a G.P.?"

"We don't get sick," answered Vachon quickly. "That is—" he continued, when she gave him a sidelong glance, "we didn't used to get sick."

"You're all right now."

"You know what it's like—scrapes heal up. If you fall into a window or snag yourself on a beam, maybe, but the physical stuff we can generally deal with on our own."

"Uh-huh." With a small sigh, Natalie thought back to the numerous bullets and shrapnel she'd extricated from Nick during his career as a police detective. That was something else she was hoping—that he wouldn't be stupid enough to walk into a bullet right now. Removing a bullet from a vampire wasn't an easy thing to refer to another doctor for treatment, besides which Nick could be *such* a baby about things like that. "But you're fine."

"Yeah. Well, sort of."

She heard Vachon shift in the seat, his leather jacket rubbing against the upholstery—he was nervous. The last thing she wanted to deal with was a nervous vampire. And why the hell was she dealing with vampires at all? If she walked away from Nick, she'd walk away from that world, too. Although she had a feeling letting that particular connection fade into the sunset wouldn't be quite so easy.

"It's not me," said Vachon. "There's a friend of mine. Someone hurt her."

"And you want me to take a look at her?" asked Natalie. Another glance at the sky gave her a good estimate—she had plenty of time until dawn. "No problem. Although you should have mentioned something back there. I've got some equipment in my emergency bag in the trunk—"

"No," said Vachon, cutting her off. "No, she doesn't need that kind of help. Not now. She doesn't want any help. She says she doesn't need any."

Natalie's heart leapt into her throat and she felt a small shiver going through her, intuition and too much experience at crimes scenes kicking in.

A rape. It had to have been a rape, or something of that sort. "Your friend is mortal?"

"A vampire."

"Don't you people have someone to handle that sort of thing? Some sort of help . . . no, I suppose you wouldn't. Survival of the fittest. The best predator survives, the weakest falls by the wayside." She was thinking aloud now. "So, you want me to have a talk with her? I don't know if that's a good idea. I'm not trained for that sort of thing. There's a doctor who helped me, one of your kind, her name's Paula—"

"No," said Vachon quietly. "That's not why I'm here."

She realized that he'd moved between heartbeats—the sound of his seatbelt sliding back into the holder was only starting to register when she felt him sitting close beside her, his hand on her shoulder. Her mouth was dry; it was an effort to form words. "Then why *are* you here?"

"My friend . . . she was roughed up. She didn't deserve it—she was trying to do someone a favor." There was a pause; she could almost hear him lick his lips, his mouth close to her ear, his voice barely above a whisper. "He took advantage. He hurt her."

"A close friend?"

"Like family."

Natalie shut down the part of her brain that started to scream and concentrated on driving, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "The guy who did the roughing up . . . we wouldn't happen to be talking about Nick, would we?"

"Could be."

Damn the way he could be so cool, so offhand about this, that applying to both Vachon *and* Nick. So Nick's little sexual escapade hadn't been pretty. Why did that not surprise her? It made sense that he'd abuse elsewhere the strength and brutality he tried to hard to deny, that he shielded from her—she was just as glad she'd never had to deal with that side of him. She had a feeling that she wouldn't have lived through the experience.

Natalie wasn't all that certain she was going to survive the drive home. "Nick hurt someone you love?"

There was a pause—*that* had caught him aware, she'd used the 'L' word!

"Someone I care for," he corrected. "Someone I've cared for, for a very long time."

"She wants revenge?"

Again, a pause. Good, make him think about it. It would give her time to drive . . . where? She was on Yonge street. Short of stopping the car dead in traffic, unfastening her seatbelt, and bolting for the sidewalk while screaming at the top of her lungs, there was nothing she could do. And the memory of how quickly Vachon had changed position—his grip on her arm was light, but unmistakable—left her little hope of being able to even get her door lock open before he could stop her.

"No." He drew back and his voice increased in volume to a normal, conversational tone. "She doesn't want revenge. She wants it forgotten. She doesn't want anything."

"But *you* want revenge?"

"He's hurt someone I . . . someone I love."

She gave him points for saying the 'I' word—intellectually, at least. Part of her brain was still screaming hysterically, but another part was taking precise notes of this conversation. Whatever you say may be held against you in a court of—

"Now I get it." She forced a chuckle. "You want to hurt someone Nick loves? Well, you're too late—Nick's done a better job of that than you ever could. He tore my heart in two, handed it to me on a platter, then asked if I wanted more." She looked over at Vachon, meeting his startled gaze for as long as she dared take her eyes from the road, adding, "I don't know if you can do better than he's done. You'd have to try pretty hard."

The grip on her arm loosened, then disappeared, causing the screaming in her head to drop a couple of notches. "I don't *want* to hurt you, Dr. Lambert."

"But you'll hurt me to get back at Nick?" She forced herself to straighten in her seat—her neck muscles were starting to cramp from the tension. It took an effort not to flinch when she felt Vachon's fingertips on her neck and she nearly passed out in fear before she realized that he was lightly massaging the muscles in her back and shoulder. "How's your friend going to feel about that?"

"She'll be angry."

"I'll say. If it were me, I'd hate you." She took a deep breath, thinking of the horrible murder of her godchild, of how the murderer had himself been murdered by someone in the name of justice, and how she'd felt. "You should know by now that it won't make a difference. It doesn't last. It doesn't change anything. They're still dead . . . or hurt," she amended quickly, the memories filling her eyes with tears that her fear had not. "It doesn't change what happened. That never changes. Never."

There was a break in traffic. On a hunch, Natalie turned the car into a quiet side street, then down another street, then into an alley behind a store. It was deserted and, when she flicked off the car lights and shut off the engine, perfectly dark and silent. Turning toward Vachon, she placed her hands calmly in her lap.

"Dr. Lambert—"

"You've called me 'Natalie' before," she reminded him, trying to sit very still, her voice barely wavering.

What she was doing was insane and she knew it—that panicked part of her brain had started screaming again, but she didn't care. Somehow, for once, she felt completely in control of the situation—either she was going to live or she was going to die, it was all but out of her hands.

"Natalie—" Vachon glanced away, as if embarrassed or nervous. He reached over and grabbed her hand, holding it tightly. She tried not to wince, knowing that he didn't mean for it to be painful. "You saved my life."

"Such as it is." After a long breath, she managed a smile. "Yes, I did."

"It isn't supposed to be . . . it isn't supposed to be like this."

The smile came easier now and she reached up a hand to touch his cheek—cold flesh. "I guess you thought it would be different. But it's not. Killing is killing."

He stared at her in amazement. "You're not afraid?"

"What—you can't hear my teeth chattering?" When he frowned, she brushed the back of her hand against his cheek, then rested her hand over his own. "I'm scared silly; you could break my neck before I could blink. You're a killer, a predator, but you're also a person. Either you'll kill me or you won't kill me—there's not a lot I can do about it." Natalie took another long breath, trying to maintain her composure. "You don't know *how* sorry I am that Nick hurt your friend, not only for her sake and your sake, but for his and mine. He ruined—"

Her voice caught in her throat and she paused, looking away, until she felt Vachon's hand squeeze her own lightly. "He ruined what we had. We'd fought *so* hard for it, but he'd ruined it. It wasn't out of malice, at least that's what I think. He just did something dumb. I'm pretty sure he's sorry for it. I know he's trying to tell me that he's sorry. I don't know if he's said anything to her—he should. I guess he hasn't spoken to you. I don't know that he'd think about it; he doesn't seem to think about things like that. In fact, he doesn't seem to think at *all* sometimes—"

There were tears in her eyes and her voice, but she didn't much care. Natalie stared out into the darkness of the alley, at the grim brick walls. Somewhere inside she knew that her life wasn't going to end here, but she almost hoped it would. It was too hard thinking about all of this, thinking about how she was trapped, no matter what she did. If she left him, Nick would leave and she could return, mostly, to her mortal life and her job. Maybe date again, maybe find someone, maybe have kids, or maybe not and continue her career without family and a mortgage and a whole other set of problems to juggle. If she stayed with him, it was only a matter of time before she got too old and he lost interest in her, if it even took him that long to stray again. Even if he were faithful, how long would they really have? They'd have to move when it became apparent that he wasn't aging. They could adopt, but that would be unfair to a child or children—bring them into a two parent home that was destined to become a single parent home sooner than any of them could know. Their lives would be dictated by the rising and setting of the sun, by the darkness and the light. It would all end long before it should, so soon that she couldn't bear to think about it. There could be a cure in the future . . . which would bring problems of another kind.

That's what she wanted. To try it, at least, and see if they could make a small miracle for themselves, as they'd had their share of so many miracles already. Her only certitudes were that time was against them, that LaCroix would always attempt to undermine them, that she could never completely trust Nick again . . . .

And that she loved him. That she wanted to spend whatever time she could with him, to share her life with him and he share his life with her, whatever it cost. Maybe, even, to share the darkness with him, if that's what it took to keep them together.

For some reason, it all began to pour out of her, all of her hopes and her fears and her desires. The tears, too, came and went, and she eventually gave up trying to control them. It didn't matter that it was Vachon, it could have been anyone, anyone who could have understood the unique circumstances of her relationship with a vampire who didn't want to be a vampire and who loved her but who was as flawed and as magnificent as any mortal she'd ever met. It was embarrassing, a good bit of it probably didn't make sense, and when the words finally seemed to slow to a trickle and then stop, Natalie pulled herself out of her would-be murderer's comforting embrace and blew her nose into the wadded up tissues she found in her coat pocket.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to dump everything on you like that. But who else can I talk to?" Wiping her nose, she became aware of his dark eyes watching her and couldn't help but laugh. "I must look like hell."

"You are sort of red and puffy." A cold finger traced the warm, tender circle beneath one of her eyes gently and he smiled.

"All male vampires must go to the same charm school—you know exactly what to say to make a woman feel that she hasn't lost all of her allure." Natalie blew her nose again, then tucked the tissue in her pocket. Placing her hands on the steering wheel, she looked over at Vachon and asked, "What now?"

"Now?"

"Yeah. If you're going to kill me, you'd better do it soon. You're getting close to deadline. And I do mean that literally."

"I'm not going to kill you." He met her eyes for a long moment, then added softly, "But I *am* going to drive you home." He opened the passenger door and then suddenly he was standing outside the driver's side of the car, rapping lightly on the window.

She contemplated gunning the engine for the barest second, before unlocking the car door, scooting across the seat, closing the passenger door, and putting her seatbelt in place. "I'm only letting you do this because my eyes are so swollen from crying I can't see straight." She sniffled, then looked over as Vachon slid behind the wheel. "You do have a license, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah." He turned the key in the ignition, gunned the engine, then gunned it again. "I think it expired in '72. Or '73."

"It's not far from here. I'm just around the corner, at—"

"I know."

Silence fell as she digested that bit of information. She'd had a feeling for the last week that someone had been watching her during the evenings . . . she'd thought it might have been Nick keeping tabs on her. Knowing what she knew now, there was a good chance it had been Vachon. And what if LaCroix had decided not to honor their truce and it had been him . . . ?

He seemed to sense her shiver. Vachon reached for the heat and asked, "Cold?"

"No. Fear finally kicked in. I figure by noon I'll have dissolved into a frayed bundle of nerves and I'll spend the rest of the day under the bed. I'll have to come out of hiding long enough to do wash, of course, but then I'll dive right back underneath and stay there."

"Do you always joke when someone threatens to kill you?"

"I've found that screaming doesn't help much."

The eyes that met her own were wide, dark, and all too understanding. "You're right—it doesn't."

His words sent another shiver down her spine. Natalie settled for folding her arms and trying to regain her composure, just as glad that she'd allowed Vachon to drive. It was only a few more blocks to her place, but her sudden verbal catharsis had left her more than a little wobbly. Add that to the delayed fear reaction, and she would have been certain to have taken out several hydrants and a number of public mailboxes in her path. At least at this hour of the morning there was a minimum of traffic and no pedestrians.

As Vachon pulled her car into a parking space—the same one she'd occupied yesterday morning, she noted automatically—she found herself just as glad that the streets were so deserted. The police obviously had better things to do than chase down speeding vampires with expired driver's licenses.

Vachon took the keys from the ignition, placed them in her hand, then folded her fingers over them. "Should I walk you to the door?"

"I think this is far enough for a first date. Or—should we call this a first assassination attempt?"

He grimaced and looked out the windshield, as if embarrassed. "What I said before—I never wanted to hurt you. I just got so wrapped up with the idea of hurting Nick . . . you got in the way. I'm sorry." Vachon turned to face her, took her other hand, and lifted it to his lips, promising, "You'll never have any reason to fear me, ever again. If anyone, *anyone*, ever hurts you, you come to me. All right?"

The gesture was so gallant and so adolescent that it made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. Instead, Natalie settled for a weary smile. "I don't need your protection. If you want to do me a favor, the next time something like this happens and you're about to kill somebody caught in the middle, think about what almost happened tonight . . . then let them go. For me."

"The next time . . . and the time after that." Vachon's fingers closed around her hand, squeezing it. "For you."

He left the driver's side door open and a gust of wind blew in, making her shiver. Natalie sat there for a moment, drew her hand back to her chest, then leaned over and closed the driver's side door. "Damnit! I *wish* they wouldn't do that."

They were vampires, after all, and they didn't seem to remember how mortals thought or sensed or felt, unless reminded frequently and emphatically. As she walked up the walk to the apartment building, she decided that even though that was something she'd learned before, it was also something she should always keep in mind . . . at least while the undead were even a peripheral part of her life.

Natalie wondered, almost as an afterthought, if embroidering that slogan on a pillow might help.

The phone messages left on her answering machine started with the third week. They were short, apologetic, and humble. By Wednesday she'd gotten into the habit of opening the door, walking straight to her answering machine, holding her finger over the erase button . . . but somehow the finger always slipped to 'play' instead and she ended up listening to message after message. She began to wonder, after the second set, whether he was sleeping at all during the day and found herself relying on her beeper to screen her cellular calls, letting Grace know that beeping her in an emergency was now imperative.

The high-fashion boutique boxes stopped arriving, but the candy and small gifts continued—nothing too exotic or expensive that would start Internal

Affairs or the revenue service sniffing around either of them for graft or unreported income. She set everything aside in a pile—except for the boxes of candy that she donated to the break room at the office—and knew by Friday that she had to decide what she was going to do about Nick.

Friday was her night off and Natalie had everything planned—she picked up Chinese take-out with her dry cleaning, took a long, hot bubble bath, and put on some water for her hot cocoa. This was *her* night. Fortified with as much monosodium glutamate as her body could handle, clean as a whistle, and under the soporific effect of the cocoa, she figured she'd be as relaxed as she was ever going to get. Between her self-censored chats with Grace and Tracy and her unintentional heart-felt burbling to Vachon, she'd pretty much weighed the pros and cons of every argument. Now it was time to decide.

She'd just poured the water for the cocoa and was heading for the television and the late-evening news—with any luck, the comet was coming back and she wouldn't have to make her decision—when the front door buzzer rang. Natalie was wearing a nightshirt, a pair of sweat pants, and fuzzy blue bedroom slippers and her wet hair was wrapped in a towel. The thought that it might be Nick froze her in place, but then she realized that he wouldn't be so brazen as to simply ring her door buzzer—he'd have called first. Just to make certain, she padded over to the door and peered through the keyhole.

Later, she decided that she never would have guessed at the identity of her visitor.

"I hope you don't mind my dropping by unannounced," said LaCroix, when she'd opened the door. He was, as usual, wearing a black silk shirt and black slacks beneath a long black leather coat. What *was* unusual was the bouquet of red roses cradled in his arms. "May I come in? Or am I interrupting something?"

Natalie got through the shock first, just after he'd thrust the flowers into her grasp, pushed her gently to one side, and had wandered into the living room of her apartment. He stopped at the back of the couch and gestured down at the open cartons of Chinese food that she hadn't started to attack. "If I'm interrupting your meal, I can return at a later—"

"No. Now will be fine." Closing the door, Natalie walked past him and placed the flowers on an end table. "What do you want?"

She didn't dare look at him, not at first, although she was aware that *he* was looking around to his heart's content, like a visitor in a museum.

"Must I want something?"

"You always do."

"Perhaps I do, at that." He smiled, almost charmingly, when she glanced at him in surprise, then gestured toward the couch. "Would you mind if I—?"

"Please do."

LaCroix seated himself on the couch and Natalie padded over to a chair perpendicular to one side, more than a little conscious of her fuzzy blue slippers. Leaning forward, LaCroix picked up one of the white take-out boxes and lifted a long green vegetable out of the contents with a pair of chopsticks.

"That's chow mein," explained Natalie.

"Is it?" He raised an eyebrow, regarded it thoughtfully, then stuck the chopsticks into the chow mien and abandoned the box to the table, not bothering to suppress a shudder of disgust. "You should be eating better fare."

"I had no idea you were so concerned about my health."

"I'm not—directly. Nicholas is concerned about your health. I am concerned about Nicholas. It follows that—"

"You want me to stay healthy." Natalie sighed and folded her hands in her lap. "That might not be a problem for you any more."

"That's why I'm here. Have you made your decision, yet?" When Natalie looked up at him, surprised, he graced her with a thin smile. "Yes, I know everything. Who else could Nicholas bare his soul to?"

Natalie licked her lips. "He's been taking your advice?"

"Initially, yes. I suggested that he forget this madness; I had him half-convinced that he was in the right and you were in the wrong." LaCroix cleared his throat, then folded his hands and looked away. "The results were less than I had hoped for. He became taciturn, started brooding . . . even I couldn't stand having him around."

"Serves you right. Especially since you promised—"

"I *know* what I promised," said LaCroix sharply, and Natalie found herself fixed by a compelling stare. "I haven't interfered, haven't moved to act against you—although the opportunities have presented themselves time and again. I merely . . . advised." He waved his hand, then let it fall. "Nicholas ceased to listen."

"Good for him." She met LaCroix's even stare boldly and felt no small amount of pride on Nick's behalf.

"But not good for you—either of you—or your relationship. Nicholas can be charming at times. He can also be the very essence of obstinacy." LaCroix his palms together and Natalie smiled, the movement reminding her vaguely of praying. "I've come to sue for peace on Nicholas' behalf."

If she'd have been drinking, it would have been a spit-take. As it was, Natalie almost choked. "*Nick* sent you?"

"No. He has no idea that I'm here. In fact, the very thought would infuriate him." LaCroix's smile had an edge to it that made her shiver. "All the more reason for me to be here."

"And a really good reason for you to leave," said Natalie, pushing herself out of her chair and to her feet, hoping that he'd take the hint. "I told you, I haven't decided what I want to do."

Unfortunately, LaCroix remained seated, staring up at her. "But you *will* decide . . . ?"

"Tonight."

"Then, I'm not too late." He glanced down at the carpet. "You know that you'll never have the strength of such absolute trust in him again? There will always be some doubt. Nicholas is constant in his inconstancy if nothing else."

"I know."

That half-smile appeared again and LaCroix's gaze returned to the food on the coffee table. "Yet, you still consider forgiving him and taking him back? What a magnificent heart you must have, Dr. Lambert, to offer him such clemency at the cost of your own pride, your own self respect. You must love him very much. And trust that he loves you, as well."

"I haven't said that I'm going to take Nick back," she said defensively.

"Then, there *is* still a hope for an alternate suitor?" Before she could quite comprehend the words, LaCroix turned his gaze back to her, that clear and mesmerizing stare. "Would it be reasonable to assume that if Roxanne will accept Cyrano's words on Christian's behalf, she would accept Cyrano's words on his own behalf?"

Natalie opened her mouth to reply, but found that she couldn't—she was stunned, not by any hypnotism, but by the fact that LaCroix had fallen to one knee before her, had taken her hand, and was saying something . . . she didn't understand the language, but it was beautiful. She would have been the first to admit, if pressed, that his performance as the Nightcrawler was compelling and there were a number of nights she'd found herself listening to his show, so entranced with the beauty of his speaking voice that she'd lost track of what he'd said. It had been something that she'd written in her notebook, an understanding how such an eloquent speaker could have seduced a crusading knight with little more than words, twisted the truth over the centuries and still held a struggling and captive spirit in thrall. She often thought about what would have happened to her in Nick's place; would she have had the will to have broken away from a master like LaCroix?

Now, at least, she had some part of the answer and found it disturbed her. There was a distant familiarity to his words, as if she could almost make sense of them, but the meaning escaped her. When he had finished his recitation, he ruined it with a raised eyebrow, inviting her comment.

She drew her hand back from his as if burned and took a step away from him, her heart beating all too quickly in her chest. "That was . . . French?"

"Frankish. Or a later translation of Frankish verse—which in some parts became French and in others—" She could almost hear his shrug. "It is . . . quite old."

"But, what does it mean, in English?"

"English?" There was a sigh. "The Franks were earthy people—Charlemagne himself was blunt, though he could ascend to heights of brilliant oratory when moved, either by his piety or the swell of a woman's breast. A translation would be somewhat freeform, brutal, uninhibited, like many of the later Beat poets. You might not like it."

Her heart was still pounding. Natalie cleared her throat, still afraid to turn toward him and finding it difficult to breathe. "Try me."

"If you insist." He moved closer—she could almost feel the cool of his skin and the soft silk of his shirt against her back. "You are sex, lover, mother, lover, all sex, heat and burning lust; me inside you, in your burning darkness, the darkness of your sex, your fire, your truth—"

The words were whispered in her ear, his cool breath brushing past, tickling. She straightened, but didn't move away.

"You are woman, moist and whole and sex; we fuck and fuck and fuck because we are all there is; we are heat and light and darkness; we fuck the world into being and we fuck it into death; we make time and time makes us; I take you, you are lover, sex, you take me and I burn and we make time begin and end again . . . ."

His voice echoed through her long after he stopped speaking. At some point she'd begun to tremble, not quite certain why. Natalie closed her eyes and remained still, trying to find some wellspring of cool, calm logic within her not touched by the silver barbs in his tone or the passion of those raw words.

She found that cool, logical place, and smiled. Then she chuckled, as she realized that her eyes had closed. Opening then, she turned toward him and seated herself on the arm of the chair. "You're good. You've very, *very* good."

LaCroix sketched out a half-bow. "So I've been told."

"And arrogant."

"Confident," he corrected, his tone and expression devoid of malice. "Some find that appealing."

He took a step toward her and Natalie stiffened when she realized that she'd given herself no room for retreat. Staring up at him and trying to ignore the feelings he'd stirred at the core of her being, she frowned. "You said you wouldn't interfere."

"I'm not interfering. Just . . . offering."

She took a long breath and still dared to stare up at him suspiciously, afraid to look away. "Offering what? You want to make peace?"

"Hardly." There was a grim smile on his features as he hands snaked down to her shoulder, his fingertips brushing the edge of her nightshirt, baring a portion of her shoulder. "To make love."

"I'm a coroner, not the love-doctor." Natalie grasped the edge of the nightshirt and drew it right up to her neck angrily. "What do you think I am, a vampire sex-toy?"

To her surprise, LaCroix took a few steps back, as if sensing that his prey was feeling trapped. "On the contrary—you're intelligent, beautiful, you have a delicious sense of irony. You're well acquainted with vampire psychology and physiology." He clasped his hands together and drew them up to his lips, standing in silent regard for a moment, studying her. "I don't think there's ever been any mortal who's been privy to more of our secrets and not begged for a chance to be brought across."

"Maybe I know *too* much to ask," countered Natalie.

"You know too much about our limitations," answered LaCroix. He walked toward her slowly, his gaze locked on her own as if he thought she might flee. Lifting her hand, he stroked the length of her palm lightly with his fingers, adding, "But you know nothing of the ecstasies our existence offers."

Shivers ran through her with each stroke of his fingers across the flesh of her hand, but to pull away would mean defeat. Her will was stronger than his. It *was*. "Like?" she demanded, in an attempt to call his bluff.

"Most of your knowledge is from Nicholas." He leaned his head close to hers, his breath tickling her ear. "I know things Nicholas will *never* know. Two thousand years. Two *thousand*. Aren't you at all curious?" LaCroix drew back until they were nose to nose, stared into her eyes, and smiled. "Of course you are . . . ."

The kiss was and wasn't a surprise. It was telegraphed enough so that she could have turned her head, fallen back into the chair and pulled away, out of range.

The surprise, even to herself, was that she didn't. Closing her eyes, Natalie let herself be kissed, something in between a chaste, 'we're related' type of kiss and a full frontal tongue assault. After a moment, she pulled back and he did the same, straightening, arms folded, as if waiting for her critique. Which she was more than happy to deliver.

"Nick's a better kisser."

LaCroix seemed stunned for a moment, then a smile slid slowly across his lips. "That *is* a surprise—foreplay has never been Nicholas' strong suit. You have to understand, his relationships were never meant to be lasting romances."

"Oh *that's* good to know." Natalie folded her arms, mimicking LaCroix's posture. "So, basically, you're saying that a male vampire takes what he can get while he can get it?"

"Not precisely." LaCroix took a step closer to her and leaned down near her again, his hands resting on the chair arm to either side of her body. "An intelligent vampire learns how to please a mortal partner. The ecstasy of pleasured blood is incomparable." His hands left their perch and slid up her arms as he added, "The taste is fuller, richer, more succulent . . . ."

The first kiss was a dress rehearsal for the second. LaCroix's mouth began to devour her own, a teasing frenzy of nipping followed by him gathering her up into his arms. At some point, she realized that she'd given up complete control of her body—he was supporting her weight. And then, as he nibbled the length of her hair to her earlobe and Natalie gasped aloud for air, LaCroix whispered, "Nicholas is watching . . . ."

Her first reaction would have been panic, but her muscles had all liquefied at some point during the previous ten to twenty seconds. His lips covered her own again and she couldn't breathe, nor was that her main concern. But when they broke from the kiss, she held him near and whispered into his ear as softly as she could, "When he's gone . . . ."

LaCroix's attentions to her continued, one arm in the center of her back, supporting her, the other hand traveling her and there—cool fingertips leaving trails of sensation in their wake. She didn't fully participate, nor did she stop him, waiting to see what he might do and if he might tell her the moment when—

"He's gone."

LaCroix released her as he spoke the words, but by then Natalie had regained enough muscular control to stand, somewhat shakily, on her own. She knew her face was flushed and there were parts of her body that felt like they were on fire, but she straightened and met his gaze evenly. "Thanks for the demonstration . . . but no thanks."

The best word to describe the look on LaCroix's face was flabbergasted—he simply did not seem to comprehend the words. "Dr. Lambert—Natalie—" Pausing, he cleared his throat and resumed his composure almost instantly. "What I offer—"

"I don't want."

"You don't *think* you want—"

"I want love." She took a step toward him. "Not just sex, no matter how

fantastic it is. I want love. I love Nick. I want Nick—not you, not what you can offer."

"If you take what I offer, you can have Nick. You can have anyone, anything—"

Natalie shook her head. "Not on those terms. That's only a last resort and even then I'd want Nick to bring me across, not you. Besides, you don't want *me*. I'm only interesting to you because Nick is interested in me. You see me as another way of controlling Nick; I'd never allow you to do that." She took another step closer to him. "Can you understand that? That it has to be an act of love?"

There was rage in his eyes—sheer anger—but Natalie didn't dare turn away, didn't dare show weakness. For a moment she regretted having waited until Nick was gone, wondering if she'd pushed this just a little too far . . . you never did know exactly what a vampire would do when cornered. She had a feeling LaCroix hadn't felt this cornered in a long time.

Something in his manner changed. It was sudden, she might have missed it if she wasn't staring into his eyes, trying to determine whether she'd just committed suicide by turning him down. "An act of love . . . ?" He shook his head, glanced at her, then pointedly looked away. "Yes, I understand. This needs to be discussed—"

"I'm asking you to leave. Nicely." When he hesitated, she added, "Now."

Again, she thought she might have pushed her luck one too many times, LaCroix's grim smile leaving no room for doubt that he would have cheerfully torn her limb from limb at that moment if he hadn't been bound by his promise not to interfere. He headed for the door, opened it, then paused and looked back at her, his expression almost wistful. "You'll never know what you turned down."

"I do know, in theory." Natalie took a breath, released it slowly, then nodded. "That's why I turned it down."

There were no threats, no exhortations, no scenes . . . LaCroix simply left, closing the door softly behind him. He didn't even slam the door on his way out. She was just as glad because at that point any loud noise would have caused her to jump out of her skin. Natalie's immediate reaction, once that door had closed behind LaCroix and remained closed for at least five minutes, was to lock it, then collapse onto the couch. For an hour or so she picked at the cold Chinese food, particularly the garlic beef, and wondered how she'd lived this long and how much longer she might expect to live, dealing with vampires so cavalierly.

That *was* the way to treat them, after all. She'd learned to respect their strength and their experience, their intelligence and their instincts—survival *and* predatory—but she'd also learned that they weren't omnipotent. They had physical weaknesses that could be exploited and they were, underneath, still people with psychoses and shortcomings and flaws. One of her psychology professors had been fond of quoting a passage that said that both God and the devil existed in every man, in varying proportions. That was particularly true of the vampires she'd met, although both their strengths and their weaknesses seemed to have been magnified. Nick could be the kindest, gentlest, selfless, caring man she'd ever known . . . but she also seen him become self-absorbed, obsessive, petty, cruel, nasty, and thoughtless without so much as a moment's notice. She was almost certain that he truly loved her.

However, she was *absolutely* certain that he had thoughtlessly cheated on her.

A decision had to be made.

Halfway between what was left of the mooshu and the pork-fried rice, Natalie made that decision.

The problem was, she wasn't at all certain how to tell Nick what she'd decided and why. By the end of the pork-fried rice and while she was picking out the spicy leaves in the tangerine beef container, Natalie had decided that it would be better to wait until Nick approached her. It would be easier to stick to her guns if their confrontation occurred on her own turf, on her terms. She didn't want anything to go wrong. Who knew what would happen then?

It took him three days. She'd worked a double shift, straight through the afternoon, and so had the evening off. After a nap, Natalie had dressed, shrugged into her raincoat, and was about to brave the elements in search of cat food and chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream. When she opened her apartment door, she found Nick standing there, dripping on her doormat.

A quick glance at the hall carpeting told her just how long he'd been pacing outside her door, probably trying to get up the nerve to ring or knock. The fact that his hair was plastered to his skull and water was still beading and pooling on the leather jacket meant that he'd probably spent a good long time pacing outside her building, as well.

Opening the door had startled him and she got a brief glimpse of sorrow and longing in his eyes before he turned his gaze away. "Nat—I know you didn't want to see me, but I needed—"

"Will you get in here? You're dripping on the carpet." Grabbing his arm, she dragged him into the apartment, through the living and dining room, and directly into the kitchen, where the water would do the least amount of damage to the tile. "Take off your jacket—you're soaked through! I know you're damn near indestructible," she scolded, attempting to peel the jacket off him, "but

even you should know enough to come in out of the rain. You won't be able to do this when you're mortal—you'd catch your death first—"

"Nat—" He caught her arms, holding her there, one arm out of the jacket. "Please—stop. I have to tell you . . . ."

The words faltered and fell away. He simply stared into her eyes, his expression so unbearably sad that she felt tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. "We do need to talk," she agreed, finally breaking the silence. She squeezed his arms with her fingers in reassurance, then sighed. "But can you get out of those wet things first? You are not sitting on my couch like that."

"I'll stand."

"No—" Freeing herself from his grasp, she propelled him from the kitchen, to the hall, then to the bathroom. When he paused in the doorway, slightly bewildered, she added, "You're gonna strip down, hang everything up on the shower rail to dry, and put on my fuzzy bathrobe—it should be big enough to fit you. I'm going to go make myself a cup of coffee and then we'll sit in the living room and discuss this like grownups. All right?"

He hesitated for only a moment, his gaze meeting hers. Eventually, a faint smile formed, matching her own, and he ducked his head. "What color's your bathrobe?"

"Navy blue."

"Good. If it was pink, we'd have to hold our conversation through the bathroom door."

"That might *not* be such a bad idea." With a slight push, she ushered him into the bathroom, then closed the door behind him. Natalie returned to the kitchen and promptly began coffee preparations on automatic pilot. Taking off her coat, she draped it over the back of a kitchen chair, then seated herself and took a deep breath, all sense of self-possession rapidly draining from her. What should she do? What should she say?

When the coffee was finished, she rose and poured a cup. A sound at the kitchen doorway made her turn.

She tried not to laugh. Really, she *did* try. But Nick's hair was still damp and tousled and the bathrobe barely fit him, stretched to its limits across his shoulders and ending just below his knees. The two ends of the tied belt barely met and he held the edges closed in such a death grip that she instantly realized that he probably wasn't wearing anything but the robe at that moment.

Natalie was relieved when he grinned in response to her chuckle. "This was your idea," he reminded her.

"Um . . . yeah." Picking up her coffee cup, she walked toward him and then past him, heading for the living room. "Sorry I don't have anything else. Unless you want a blanket . . . ?"

"Togas were a little before my time—never did get the hang of them."

Natalie seated herself on the couch, almost directly in the middle of the seat. Nick paused, then took the hint, carefully sitting in the chair just to her right. She held the coffee in her hand and tried to soak up the heat, thinking that might stop the nervous shivers running through her. "So."

"So." Nick cleared his throat. "Nat, what do you want me to say? I was wrong. I'm sorry." He paused and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "You'll never know how sorry I am. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you."

She closed her eyes, hearing the words and letting them settle around her heart. He meant them. She knew he meant them.

"Can you forgive me?"

Opening her eyes, she set the coffee cup down on the table and then turned her head to meet his gaze. Those blue eyes, so wide and earnest and hurting. Pride wasn't an issue. He was taking the blame; he was asking for forgiveness. She *could* forgive him, but was she strong enough, brave enough, trusting enough to return to the precarious balance they'd managed to achieve? It was like living in a house of cards in a perpetual hurricane—sooner or later it was all going to come crashing down upon them.

Natalie looked away and picked up the cup again—her hands were shaking. "LaCroix was here."

She wasn't even certain she'd said it aloud; it was as if some part of her had distanced herself from this, didn't want to have to go through it. There were no guarantees, however much she might want them.

There was another long silence, before Nick answered, "I know." She heard him shift in the chair and his tone was tinted with guilt as he added, "I was . . . keeping an eye on you. I was afraid that someone might—that something might happen."

"He came here on his own," said Natalie. "He fed me bull around Cyrano. Felt me out about seeing him." And felt me up, she added to herself, still more than a little stunned at the thought that she'd survived that encounter.

"And you told him—?"

Startled by the edge in his voice, Natalie sat up and met his gaze again. "Why don't you ask *him*?"

"I don't think that's such a good idea." He hung his head, then gave her a sidelong glance. "I haven't spoken to LaCroix in over two weeks. I haven't even listened to the radio." He bit his lip and looked down. "Nat, promise me that you won't see LaCroix again unless I'm with you."

Bristling, she took a sip from her coffee cup, then set it back on the table. "You don't trust me."

"I'm frightened for you. No matter what bargain he made with us, he can find a loophole. I don't want you hurt, by LaCroix or . . . anyone."

She looked at Nick again, annoyed that he was *still* assuming that he had a right to protect her, but stopped when she realized how pale he was—his lips were pinkish, rather than red, and his flesh was almost bone white. A bolt of fear moved through her and she almost knocked her coffee cup over as she rose to her feet. His eyes were fever bright. "Are you all right?"

When he didn't answer, looking away, she walked over to him and touched his cheek with her fingertips. He flinched at her touch—his skin was colder than she'd ever remember having noticed before. "I was right—you *were* standing out in the rain, weren't you? My God, Nick!"

"I'm all right. Just . . . hungry." There was such guilt in the word, but he turned his gaze toward her, eyes desperate. "I've been trying to make up for . . . ."

"You have been feeding, haven't you?" she asked worriedly. Natalie brushed her hand through his hair—even his scalp felt cold.

"Cow's blood—a cup a day for two weeks."

"A cup a—Nick!" She drew back from him, then touched his cheek again. "That's near starvation level."

"I wanted it to be right between us again. While there was still a chance—Nat, whatever you want from me, just tell me. I'll do it." Nick took her hand from his face and held it tightly between his palms. "Forgive me? Take me back?"

Her heart rose in her throat and she felt tears gathering. "Yes, I forgive you. But—"

He pulled her close before she got a chance to finish, his face pressing against her stomach as his arms went around her waist.

She could feel the chill of his skin through her clothes, which made her want to cry more than ever. After a moment, she pulled back slightly and touched his chin, making him meet her eyes. "You won't get another chance," she told him, trying to sound stern, even though her voice was on the point of breaking. "This is it. If you *ever* do something like this again—"

"Never!" he vowed, staring up at her. "I love you. I never want to hurt you again."

Sitting on the edge of the chair, she held him close, still alarmed by the coldness of his skin. "But it's going to happen, isn't it? Not you wandering off again," she said quickly, when he pulled back as if to vehemently deny that, "I know you're serious about that. You know it's over between us if you do. I mean about us getting hurt. There's so much more than just us, isn't there? So many more people involved. We're never going to have nine-to-five jobs, a mortgage and a car payment and kids—" A lump rose in her throat at the words and she leaned down into his shoulder and the terrycloth of her bathrobe in an attempt to fight back her tears.

"If that's what you want, we'll find a way," Nick whispered in her ear. "Whatever you want, for the rest of your life . . . ."

"For the rest of *my* life," she echoed. Natalie released a long, slow sigh and closed her eyes. "I love you too much to do that to you—tie you down to my mortality."

"Isn't that my choice?" asked Nick.

She opened her eyes and found him smiling at her, which she answered with a sad smile of her own. "I want you to be happy."

"*You* make me happy."

His kiss was gentle and tender . . . and his lips were cool, almost cold. Natalie found herself shifting from the chair arm into his lap, her arms going beneath the terrycloth robe and around his neck. She shivered as he kissed the side of her face and down along the length of her neck, saying, "I've missed you," against her warm flesh.

She felt almost fevered, hot and burning against him. "I've missed you too," she answered, just before returning her lips to his.

She *had* missed him; had missed his presence and his wry humor, had missed the sense of him being around, had missed sharing bits of her day and her life with him. If time was against them, there was nothing they could do. She loved him and wanted to be with him, but only if he reciprocated.

Their kisses grew more passionate, lips and tongues against flesh. Nick's hands roamed beneath her sweatshirt and Natalie eventually gave into the inevitability, raising her hands over her head so that he could slip it off her. The straps of her bra slid down her arms. Natalie kissed along the line of his ear, her fingers brushing through his hair as he held her breasts in his palms. She shivered at the cool touch of his skin against her own, goose pimples rising as he stroked her flesh. His mouth settled on the nipple of her left breast and she moaned as he nibbled and sucked at the tip and around it, his hand lightly stroking her right breast.

Her own hands were busy, kneading the muscles of his neck and back, her fingers gliding over the surface of his skin. At one time she thought that she might memorize every inch of him and what a relief that would be, knowing there was almost no chance of having to identify his body on a morgue slab by the contour of his muscles. Her business had made her something of a muscle snob and she loved Nick's muscles, particularly the rhomboids.

Suddenly, Nick drew in a sharp breath and pressed the side of his face against her chest. His arm went around her waist and he held her tightly.

Startled, Natalie dropped one hand to his shoulder and the other to his arm as he growled against her flesh. "Nick?"

Another deep breath—his only answer was to hold her tighter. His head lowered slightly and he let out a low moan, as if in pain.

Natalie rubbed the length of the trapezoids in his neck; his muscles were bunched and taut. She held him as tightly as he held her. "It's all right," she said softly. "We should take it slow. You may not be ready for this."

It was too soon. She should feel the hard lines of the fangs beneath his lips as he pressed his face against her breast. The vampire had been freed three weeks ago, tasted vampire and human blood, and he'd said he'd have difficulty controlling it again.

She knew she should have been afraid and she was . . . for him. Slowly, she stroked her hand through his hair and whispered calming nonsense. Sitting on his lap put her in a precarious position—she couldn't move without leaving him, abandoning him. That's the last thing she wanted to do right now. This was going to be another one of their 'little' obstacles.

A minute passed, then another. Nick shifted slightly and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "It's all right," he answered, his voice strained, but quiet. "It's . . . all right now. You're safe."

"You'd never hurt me."

But fear struck some part deep into her heart when Nick raised his head and met her gaze with panicked eyes. "I would," he answered, his voice cold and old and sad. "Nat, I'd kill you before I even knew what was happening. It's too strong. It's stronger than I am."

"It's not stronger than us." She threw her arms around him and held him tightly. His flesh was still cold, still too chilled.

"Maybe you were right." He let his head rest against her shoulder even as they held one another. "It's not fair to you—I can't ask you to do this, I can't ask you to love me. I'll kill you. You know I'll-"

"Ssssh!" She shifted her weight from him and moved to sit on the chair arm again, careful not to release her hold on him. At some point her bra had been completely discarded, but Natalie spotted her sweatshirt on the floor beside the chair. Finally releasing Nick, she leaned down and picked up her sweatshirt, then slipped her arms and head into it. "It's just too soon, that's all. We both know how much of a setback it was. It'll take a while before you can control yourself."

Nick was leaning back in the chair, still breathing heavily. "Nat, I want you so badly . . . ."

She leaned forward to kiss his cheek and brushed his hair with her hand. "I want you, too. But I want you to be okay with this."

He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips. "How long?" he asked, after a moment. "A day? A week? A year?" Swallowing, he looked up at her. "Maybe never. I won't last that long. No matter how much I want you, it wants you more. The hunger inside, it just—" Before she could blink, he'd thrown himself out of the chair and he was standing at the door, with his back toward her. "I'll leave. You'll never see me again. It's the only way you'll be safe. It's the only way."

Natalie rose slowly from the chair, then walked toward him with carefully measured steps. "A cup of blood a day isn't enough—we both know that. We have to get you up to speed again; we have to feed the hunger. It worked when we took it slow, trial and error. We can do that again. We . . . ."

When he didn't turn, she placed her hands against the terrycloth of the bathrobe, in the middle of his back, and leaned against him. His muscles were tense beneath the cloth, cold and tight. They both knew they couldn't start from the beginning. The restraints weren't an option, not after what LaCroix had put them through. If this was it, if there couldn't be anything physical between them . . . it would be impossible to go back to where they'd been before.

"You don't have to leave," she said firmly. "We'll get through this. We can do it."

Nick turned until he held her in his arms, drawing her close against his skin and the bathrobe. "You don't understand. Nat, I'll kill you. The vampire will kill you."

She held onto him for a long moment, then sighed. Looking up, she brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. "It's not stronger than the both of us. It can't be. We have to give it time."

"We don't have that kind of time." His eyes were blue, but burning, intense. "It wants you and I won't be able to hold it back, not if you're so close. It won't care where you are or who you're with. LaCroix tried to tell me. He told me to push my feelings for you away, to remember what I was, that this was impossible now. He said that it wouldn't be denied. He was right—I felt it. Even now." He looked past her for a moment, as if he were staring into his own soul, then met her eyes again. "It's so close to the surface . . . even a scratch would set it free. The closer I am to you, the more danger you're in."

"It's hungry," said Natalie. "Of *course* it's hungry. You've been starving it. You've barely fed at sustenance level. Wandering out in the rain hasn't helped. And I bet you've been flying, rather than driving?" When he looked away, not answering, she pulled back from him and eyed him critically, her heart sinking.

Okay, so she'd forgiven him, but Nick hadn't forgiven himself. Cutting back his blood consumption had been a good idea, but he'd taken it too far,

seeing it as a punishment rather than a way to get back on track. For the last three weeks, he'd unconsciously done almost everything he could to let the vampire have the upper hand. Maybe it was time he started acting and thinking like a mortal.

Like a mortal . . . .

The thought lingered long enough to become an idea. If she was *very* careful and took this slowly, it might just work.

Then again, it also might just get her killed. She had another choice to make—risk everything on one throw of the dice or let Nick guilt his way out of her life forever.

The fact that she'd decided earlier that she really *did* love him made the decision a lot easier.

"Come on," she said, grabbing hold of the bathrobe sleeve and his arm in it. "You're chilled to the bone and you're not thinking straight." She headed toward the bathroom with Nick in tow, wishing she had some blood on hand. It wasn't the sort of thing that you could just order in, was it?

Or . . . was it?

"Nat, this isn't a good idea—"

"You want to get out of here? Fine." She stopped at the bathroom door. "But you're a block of ice and your clothes are still wet. You give me the clothes and I'll run them downstairs—there's a dryer in the basement—" When he opened his mouth to protest, she held up her hand. "I don't care if they're dry-clean only, that's your problem. I am *not* sending you home in the same condition you showed up. While I'm doing that, you're going to take a long, hot shower—maybe that will take the chill off you. Once you're dry *and* warm, I'll let you out that door, but not a moment before. Is that understood?"

He actually thought about protesting—she saw it in the set of his chin and that all-too serious look in his eyes.

Sliding her hand into his grasp, she stared down at the floor for a moment, then looked up at him again. "Please, Nick . . . it's all right. We'll work this out. Let's just take it one step at a time."

His hand closed around her own and her drew her closer, his other hand moving to her hair, stroking it, running through it. "One step at a time? I wish we could."

There was such regret and longing in his eyes— "Was it really that bad?"

He straightened, releasing his grasp on her hand, his other hand falling away from her. "It was too close to call. I almost didn't catch it in time."

Natalie swallowed, then smiled almost shyly and stepped into the bathroom. She pulled his wet clothing from the shower rod, then stopped to pick up his soaked shoes on the way out. "I'm afraid you're going home with wet shoes. Unless you want the slippers that go with that robe?"

"I don't think I want to chance getting stopped for a traffic violation wearing fuzzy blue bedroom slippers."

"Not one to live dangerously, huh?"

"I think we've both had enough danger tonight." Self-consciously drawing the edges of the robe closed as she passed, Nick added, "But I'll take you up on the hot shower."

"Good. You take your time, too. I've got plenty of hot water." Natalie paused with a grimace as she held up her arm—some of his clothing was still dripping. "This stuff looks like it's gonna take years to dry."

"Nat?"

She paused in the hallway, her back toward him. "Yeah?"

"I *am* sorry. I guess I really screwed things up, huh?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Once you've dried out, we can talk some more." Turning her head, she met his gaze squarely. "If we can outlast everything we've run into so far, we can outlast this."

There was a flicker of fear in his eyes, a moment of uncertainty, then he looked away. "I'd give anything to make that happen," Nick said, as he closed the bathroom door.

She stood in the hallway for a moment and took a long, slow breath, knowing exactly what she was risking. The dripping clothing reminded her that there was work to be done and Natalie snagged two things on her way out of the apartment—her purse, which contained her keys and her money, and her cellular phone. She began dialing the number on her way to the basement and the phone was ringing by the time she entered the empty basement laundry room and tossed the clothing into the dryer. She was on hold for a moment and took that opportunity to put the coins in the machine and start the cycle going.

The phone was picked up again. "Yes?" asked LaCroix's voice, cultured, but disinterested.

"It's Natalie. I need your help."

There was a momentary pause and she hoped to God he wouldn't laugh. He actually sounded more than vaguely intrigued. "You've reconsidered my offer?"

"No. Thanks just the same, but I'll pass." Natalie hopped onto a nearby, empty clothes dryer. "Nick's in a bad way—I need some blood delivered to my place, right now. I don't know what the going rate is, but you know I'm good for it."

"The going rate is . . . rather expensive. I think we can still come to some

arrangement." There was another pause. "I'm afraid I don't have any bovine blood on hand at the moment. You'd have to settle for aqua vitae. Will that be a problem?"

Bastard. Natalie grit her teeth together for a moment, then sighed. "Okay, that's fine. Whatever. I'll need three bottles."

"Three? So many?"

"Three," she repeated, her tone of voice letting him know that she was serious. "Have someone else bring it by—I don't want you and Nick in the same room right now. It's bad enough that you're in the same city."

"I have someone in mind, a disinterested third party." There was another pause and she got the impression that LaCroix was laughing at her. "It will be delivered momentarily."

Natalie sighed and slipped off the dryer, fighting the urge to slump back against it—if this part of her plan hadn't worked, the rest would have been sheer suicide. "Thank you. I owe you."

"You do. It will be a pleasure doing business with you, Dr. Lambert. Good night."

The dialtone sounded in her ear. Natalie clicked the phone shut, picked up her purse and headed upstairs. Whatever relief it might be to know that she wouldn't have to dash out into that maelstrom to a cash machine was over-shadowed by the fact that she now owed LaCroix, something that she should have avoided at any cost and probably would have if she'd been in her right mind, which she hadn't been since the evening Nick had sat up on her examining table in the morgue.

"Love *does* make you crazy," she said aloud, hiking up the steps to her apartment. She let herself back inside, dumped her purse on the couch, then stepped over Sydney, who was inconveniently sleeping in the middle of her entryway carpet. For a moment, she paused, wondering what she should do about Sydney. No matter what happened, she wanted him to be safe.

Bending down, she picked up Sydney carefully, trying not to waken him. He stirred slightly and curled up against her as she walked across to her hall closet. With a free hand she pulled a sweater from a hanger and dropped it to the closet floor, then stared down at her sleeping feline. Natalie kissed him once on the forehead, then rubbed her fingers along his belly—he stretched in his sleep. "You'd better stay here, buddy, out of the line of fire."

She intended to put him into the closet immediately, but paused for a moment longer, content to have the sleeping weight and warmth in her arms. "It'll be okay, Syd. Mommy loves you. If something happens . . . if something happens to mommy, someone will take care of you. Nick will make sure of that. I'll tell him. I'll make sure he knows that. Maybe Grace can . . . ."

The knock on the front door startled her—she nearly dropped the cat. As it was she blinked back the tears from her eyes and she placed him carefully on the sweater and then shut the closet door. He'd be safe there.

A lot safer than she'd be.

Natalie checked through the keyhole, saw the back of a head—a bunch of blonde curls—then opened the door.

It was Urs. She was wearing a brown suede jacket, fringed and ruined by the rain, her hair still curled but plastered to her skull in places. She smiled almost shyly, then lifted a brown knapsack from the floor at her feet by the straps. "Special delivery?"

Natalie matched the smile as she took the bag Urs offered, nearly dropping it as gravity took over and mortal strength was no match for vampire ease. "Wow, that's a weight. Thanks for bringing it so quickly."

"I was told it was sort of an emergency." Urs peered into Nat's apartment. "So, this is your place?"

"Yeah. Look, come in and dry off for a minute." Now she had *two* dripping vampires on her conscience. "I'd offer you a hot cup of coffee, but . . . ." Grinning, Natalie shrugged, then gestured for Urs to follow her through the apartment.

"Can't stand the caffeine. It shows up in the blood—makes me hyper." Urs touched her finger to her mouth, then shrugged almost guiltily. "Sorry, I'm not used to being able to talk to mortals like that. Kind of different, talking to somebody who knows the score."

"Do I *ever*," agreed Natalie. She gestured toward the couch. "Living room. Dining room's through here. And the kitchen is this way."

Urs turned around as she walked, trailing after Natalie. "This is really pretty. I've been thinking about getting a place like this. Curtains and doors and carpets. I've spent most of the last century on the road."

Natalie continued on to the kitchen, where she removed the bottles of blood from the knapsack. Placing them on the counter, she sighed, then returned to the dining room to find Urs studying the china on her hutch. "That's from my grandmother. She brought it with her from the old country."

"It's lovely." Urs picked up a plate and ran her fingers lightly over the flowered pattern, then turned again to look at the room. "A place just like this, that's what I'd want. Only . . . with smaller windows."

Natalie took the plate from her and put it back in place, then picked up the empty knapsack and handed it to Urs. "Have you spent a lot of time traveling?"

"If you run with Vachon's crew, you travel. He's spent a long time running. Maybe he'll settle down for a little while." Urs stepped out to the center of the

room, then turned slowly. "It seemed a waste, having something like this, to put it together and then just run out, leave it behind?" She ran her finger along the lace runner on the dining room table and smiled sadly. "I guess that's part of the trade off. Nothing last forever . . . but it would be nice if it would last for a decade, at least." Then she looked up and swung the empty bag over her shoulder. "Guess you've got company, huh? I'd better be on my way."

Natalie followed her out to the living room and to the front door. "Thanks for the delivery. Sorry I dragged you out on a night like this."

"It's okay. It was something different to do." Another smile, this time more honest. "You should come down to the Raven some night. I sing on Thursdays and Fridays."

"I'd like that. Maybe if Nick can get a night off? I don't think I want to face LaCroix on his own ground without back-up."

"Lucien? Oh, he's not so bad. You just have to know how to handle him, is all."

Natalie was stunned for a moment, not certain whether it was the fact of someone calling LaCroix 'Lucien' with such ease or the thought that he could be 'handled' like some overzealous salesperson. "You . . . um . . . know how to 'handle' LaCroix?"

Urs opened the door to the hall and paused there for a moment, as if thinking. She glanced over her shoulder, at Natalie. "Actually, I think he's the only one who knows how to 'handle' me." There was another pause and she looked past Natalie, to the room beyond. "Could you tell Nick something for me?"

"Sure." Puzzled, Natalie, leaned against the door frame.

"Tell him . . . tell him that it's okay. Just tell him I said 'it's okay.'" Then she smiled again, shrugged, and headed out, pausing only to turn and waved 'bye' with the barest flash of her hand.

Natalie was closing the door when the realization hit her. Nothing overt had been said, nothing substantial, but she *knew*.

Nick had slept with Urs.

Urs was the friend of Vachon's who'd been hurt.

On impulse, Natalie opened the hall door, but Urs was long gone. She stood there a moment and silently cursed LaCroix. He'd sent her intentionally, perhaps hoping to cause a scene. Or, maybe, just to give her a little test, to see if she'd figure it out.

Natalie barely kept herself from slamming the door shut in anger. She stood with her back against the front door of her apartment, still slightly stunned. Better to let the anger to drain out of her. She didn't want to face Nick like this. It was going to be tricky enough dealing with him, why make the situation more difficult and possibly even more dangerous?

Her stomach twisted in knots now that she had a name, a face, an identity to go with Nick's bout of infidelity. It was worse because she knew Urs—not well, after all, but she was more than a name if less than a friend. Despite the casual, street-smart exterior, there was something delicate about Urs that she'd admired, something fragile that she'd found intriguing, especially in a vampire.

Damn LaCroix!

And now she owed him, as well.

With a sigh, Natalie returned to the kitchen. The water was still running in the bathroom, but she tucked her feelings tightly within her and scouted out a bottle opener and a fairly unbreakable beer mug—it was the largest glass she had in the house. After a moment's thought, she opened all three bottles, then tucked one beneath her arm, held the other in her hands, and carried the beer mug to the bathroom.

She had a brief moment of panic when she couldn't get the door open—her hands were full—and she was afraid that Nick had locked it. It would mean getting the screwdriver from the junk drawer in the kitchen, picking the lock, and by then Nick would know what was up and any advantage she'd have in surprise would be lost.

However, tucking the mug under her arm and freeing her hand to grasp the knob did the trick. Natalie opened the bathroom door, slipped inside the room, then closed the door softly behind her.

She was slapped in the face by the heavy, hot mist produced by the steam from the shower—from the feel of things Nick had taken her at her word and was taking a scalding shower, because she felt like she'd walked into a sauna. He'd also left the lights off, but there was a faint glow of moonlight through the bathroom window, so she could barely see across the small room. She set the bottles of blood on the vanity counter, put down the glass, and began to pour.

"Nat—?" Behind her, she heard the rings of the shower curtain rattle as it was drawn aside. "What's—?"

"I thought you might need a drink." Natalie picked up the blood-filled mug and turned, only to see Nick half-hidden by the curtain, his hair plastered to his skull.

He drew back into the darkness of the tub alcove as she approached. "That's blood."

"You bet. And it's not mine, so don't bother asking." She waited at the edge of the tub, then offered the mug to him, wondering how long it would

take him to pick up the scent. "You need this and a lot more or you're going to crash and burn. Do us both a favor and drink up, like a good Nick?"

He'd pulled the shower curtain with him as he drew back, shielding the lower half of his body. In the darkness, she saw the red burning beneath the blue depths in his eyes. The water from the shower pattered against the side of the tub and onto the floor—her shoes were getting wet.

"It's . . . human," said Nick, finally, his voice deep, thick, and very, very scary.

"It's all they had."

"Nat, I—" His voice was still deep, still lost somewhere between control and the violent depths of the hunger for blood. He held out his palm as if to push the glass away, but then his hand turned, his fingers reaching for the glass.

Natalie gave it to him, then stepped back quickly, barely following the journey of the glass as Nick drew it closer, now clasping it with both hands, modesty and the shower curtain forgotten. He all but upended it into his mouth and, for a moment, the spray from the shower drained away bright crimson, then pink, then faded back to near transparency, as it sluiced away the blood that spilled from the glass. The sounds were almost desperate, a continued gulping, without pause for air or breath. Finishing it, Nick groaned and turned his back to her, resting his arm against the tile, slumping as if he needed the wall to provide his moral support now that his soul had given in to the inevitable.

The glass dangled from his other hand, as if forgotten. Reaching forward, Natalie took it from him—he offered no resistance. She backed away slowly, returning to the vanity and the bottles of blood.

It took an effort of will to turn her back to the shadowed and partly screened shower, but she did it. The liquid in the bottle was thick; it was undiluted human blood—no wine or water or ice, but full strength. She poured slowly, just as glad that the water had washed the glass clean, somehow afraid that the blood would stain her, burn her if it touched her flesh. Once the glass was full and she'd emptied one bottle only to begin the next, Natalie walked back to the shower.

Nick hadn't moved; he was standing in the darkest corner of the tub, away from the water, shadowed by the shower curtain. She saw the shadows shift when she approached. That he could smell the blood from that distance should have scared her and, perhaps, on some level it did. It frightened her more, though, to think of what might happen if he decided not to drink.

She wouldn't have blamed him—not once she'd gotten over it. She told herself that and tried to believe it. He'd avoided human blood as yet another form of penance, equating the drinking of even bottled, donated blood with the predatory aspect of his nature. This time, though, was different. It had to be different. He had to see that, he had to understand it, he had to believe it.

Even though she didn't really believe it herself. It might be a means to an end, but it was also a betrayal of what she'd told him for the past several years, that the blood was what was preventing him from coming back across. Now it was the lack of blood that was keeping them apart.

His hand emerged from the darkness, into the moonlight from the window just past the shower curtain. She tried to give him the mug, but he reached past her hand and grasped her arm, his fingers closing around the sleeve of her sweatshirt as he drew her forward into the shower with an unwavering pressure.

Natalie hesitated at the edge of the bathtub, still dressed, Nick's grip on her arm the only thing that kept her hands from shaking the blood out of the mug. She slipped one foot behind the other, pushing off her left sneaker, then kicking out of the right one. The mug had to be transferred to one hand as she pulled off the first damp sock, then the other. When her feet were bare, she yielded to the pressure of his grip and let him draw her into the shower, past the spray and into the shadowy darkness behind the shower curtain, at the far end of the tub.

Nick held her close to him, turning his back to the water as if to shield her from the brunt of it, but her sweatshirt and pants were now as damp as her socks had been and soaked in spots where she'd come into direct contact with the spray. She leaned against the length of his skin, which warmed somewhat by the blast of the once scalding water. Letting him hold her, she leaned her head on his shoulder, aware of the water beading down the skin of his neck, the movement of his adam's apple as he drank down the blood, the rise of skin above and below his eyelids that told her just how tightly his eyes were closed and what it was costing him to keep them that way.

His body was strong and solid, immovable, but as he held her she could feel the hunger within him. It was something tangible, like a cyst or a lump, but a presence that roared to life from the moment the blood touched his lips, brought to the surface by the smell and held by the lingering traces of the first glass' contents on his tongue. She *felt* the hunger, felt the power of it, the ravenous quality of it, and began to share something of his fear. How he had ever controlled this part of himself was beyond her ability to comprehend. How he might ever find the means to control it again . . . she began to doubt her previous certitude that with time it could be possible.

The second glass was finished—almost four pints, a little more than a bottle. She caught the cup before it could fall and shatter against the ceramic

tub, pulling back from Nick, fully expecting him to retreat into the darkness again, to give in to his shame.

This time, he drew her back into his arms. Opening his eyes, he threw back his head and took a deep, gasping breath like a drowning man about to sink under the dark waters for what he thought would be the last time. Her heart was racing in her chest, the sound seeming louder in her ears than the constant patter of the water against the tile floor and the shower curtain. Then he lowered his head, his eyes gold as his gaze hesitantly met her own, and he kissed her again.

The desperate need was gone. He was more tentative this time, careful. When they broke from the kiss, his arms rose to her shoulders, hugging her against his skin. "Better," he whispered, after a pause. "It's better, now."

Natalie closed her eyes against against the droplets of water that were splashing in her face and obscuring her vision. She raised a hand to brush them away and pulled back from him, the other hand still cradling the mug to her chest. "The vampire doesn't want me," she told Nick. "It's like LaCroix—he didn't want me, either, I just happened to be convenient." Her vision finally clearing, she found him smiling at her and smiled back. "It doesn't want to kill me. You don't want to kill me. It was hungry, that's all. *You* were hungry." She half-turned, suddenly remembering the nearly full bottle sitting on the vanity. "There's more—"

"No. Not now. I'm all right for now." Nick caught her shoulder, stopping her from stepping out of the tub. He deliberately pried her fingers from the glass mug with his other hand, then set it on the corner ledge of the tub, still not releasing his hold on her shoulder as if he were afraid she'd run away. When the mug was out of danger, he stepped closer and hefted a water soaked mass of her hair in his free hand. "Stay with me."

Natalie hesitated, trying not to be entranced by that winsome smile, which she knew all too well could instantly become the deadly grin of a predator. She didn't feel the presence of the vampire as she had a moment before and his eyes, even in those few minutes, had changed from gold to a very deep and startling blue. The monster, the predator, was appeased for the moment. There was such affection in his eyes, in the play of his fingers on the shoulder of her soaked sweatshirt—

"Oh . . . what the hell," she agreed.

Nick wasted no time in drawing the sweatshirt up over her head, the final pull sending it over the shower rod. Her equally soaked slacks and underwear followed soon after, landing with a distant resounding 'smack' on the tile. Natalie didn't much care. It felt right to have him so near again, right to have the familiarity of his muscles beneath her roaming fingertips, his lips on hers, his mouth devouring her own.

At one point she realized that, quite literally, her back was against the wall—the tile wall of the shower. Gazing up at him, Natalie smiled and Nick touched his forehead to hers, also smiling—they were relaxed, standing together. "Do you remember our first shower?" she asked.

He groaned in mock despair and lowered his head to rest on her shoulder. "Remember? I was terrified!"

Natalie pushed gently at his chest. "Terrified? Why? You had nothing to be ashamed of." She smirked impishly as he lifted his head and gave her a hesitant look. "I didn't mind the view. You have the cutest—"

He jumped in surprise when she pinched his buttocks, but didn't give her a chance to enjoy the tactical advantage. Almost instantly, he caught her hands with his own and held them over her head and against the wall, pressing his body against her, trapping her. "Have you no shame, woman?" he scolded lightly. "I ought to—"

"What?" dared Natalie.

In answer, Nick transferred his hold on her wrists to one hand. He turned slightly, still pinning her, but exposed her ribcage. Crooking a finger, he held it at eye level, then slowly moved it downward.

"Don't you—ow—no—*stop* that!" Natalie shrieked, as Nick ran his fingernail lightly over a ticklish spot along the side of her ribs. Within seconds she had gone from begging to cursing and back to begging again, as he continued to hold her and tickle her. The tears streaming down her eyes from laughter were washed instantly away by the barely luke-warm spray from the shower. Unfortunately for Nick, he got just a little *too* overconfident. Natalie wasn't even thinking consciously about what she was doing, it was purely an involuntary muscle response on her part—at least that's what she told herself in the horrible stunned silence that followed the moment she actually managed to shift her knee in the wrong direction at exactly the right time.

Nick didn't let out so much of a howl as a high-pitched squeal. He doubled over, backing directly into the spray and falling against the shower controls, instantly changing the water from barely warm to freezing. Pushing back the shower curtain, Natalie jumped out of the tub, caught enough of the damp bath-mat to keep her footing on the drenched tile, then shut off the water with an even better aimed blow, as Nick continued his fall forward, pitching to his knees down into the tub.

"Oh, God! I'm sorry! Nick—are you—I didn't mean—well, you shouldn't have tickled me like that and—Oh, God, I'm sooooo sorry . . . ." Natalie dropped

to her knees beside the tub and placed a hand on his back—what lovely rhomboids he had!—then tried to peer down, to get a look at his face. "Nick?"

There was a deep breath, followed by a slow exhalation. Nick remained huddled over, both hands clasped over the injured area. "Ow," he managed finally, his voice oddly strained.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

He turned his head to look at her, his expression slightly accusatory. "That's a relief." Managing another long, shaky breath, he half-turned, resting one hand on the edge of the tub, then leaned his chest against the side as well, droplets of water falling from his hair and onto the floor as he rested there for a moment, eyes wide. "Remind me never to tickle you again."

Natalie patted his back, then kissed the back of his neck. "You can tickle, just don't hold me so tight. I *do* have reflexes, even if they are teeny mortal reflexes."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said resignedly. Then Nick lifted his head, watching as she rose and headed for the bath-towels on the towel bar near the door. "There was nothing 'teeny' about that reflex. I don't think I'll ever worry again about leaving you alone with LaCroix."

Natalie threw a towel at his head, which he caught, then pulled another from the rack and wrapped it around herself. "That would be an entirely different situation."

"If it works—" Nick pried himself up out of the bathtub, the towel traveling briefly over his head, back and chest before being—carefully—tied around his waist. He limped slightly as he walked toward her. "It's a good way to distract a vampire."

"A *male* vampire," corrected Natalie. "It was luck." She grinned as he took another step and winced, then glared at her. "It didn't hurt that you're a fairly large target."

Nick paused, leaning his hand against the vanity top, his features exhibiting dismay. "*Fairly* large?"

"*Very* large," said Natalie quickly. She walked toward him, reached out her hand for the edge of his towel and—after getting his permission with a quick glance at his eyes—pulled one side open slightly and inspected the area. "Positively enormous," she amended. Then added, after a second, "Is it supposed to change color like that?"

Nick regained control of his towel and tied it around his waist apparently in high dudgeon. He stalked out of the bathroom—but not without picking up the open bottle of blood as he passed, she noted.

With a grin, Natalie turned to survey the bathroom, then the grin fell away and she sighed in dismay. There was water *everywhere*. Dropping the towel from around her to soak up a large puddle at the edge of the tub—Nick must have been dripping there, because she certainly would never have caused such a mess—she reached for her bathrobe and slipped her arms into it. Then Natalie picked up her sopping clothes and wrung them out over the tub, finally draping them over the shower rod.

It gradually dawned on her that she'd won. She wasn't dead, Nick had regained something of his equilibrium by feeding the beast within him on blood belonging to someone other than her, and things had actually started on a very promising course for the evening, until he'd decided on a course of one-upmanship and her body had decided to retaliate.

It was, however, pretty comforting to know that she could take him down with one shot if she had to. It was also more than a little comforting that he was now *very* aware of the fact that she wasn't the helpless little mortal he'd thought she was. Mopping up most of the floor with her discarded towel, she was forced to admit that it had been a lucky shot. If things got really serious, she doubted that she'd get a second chance at Nick with a shot like that. And even if she got a first chance at LaCroix . . . well, the size of the target did have something to do with it.

There was still water just about everywhere and her robe was starting to get wet. Groaning, Natalie pushed herself up off her knees—her one knee was kind of sore—tossed the wet towels into the tub in disgust, and went in search of Nick, wondering where a damp and partially naked vampire who'd bruised a little more than his ego would go to sulk.

He was lying on her couch, towel still in place, a pillow propped under his head. Natalie walked over and glared down at him. "I'd appreciate some help with the mess you left in there."

"Have pity on the wounded," said Nick. He blinked up at her, eyes all innocent, expression serious. "You wouldn't want to disturb my recuperation."

"Recuperation? The way you heal, it would take a sherman tank to knock you over."

Pulling the pillow out from under his head, Nick placed it over his face, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like a non-too-favorable comparison between her and a sherman tank.

Natalie slapped her hand against the pillow. "And what about *my* injury?"

Nick lifted the pillow from his face and tossed it aside, suddenly serious. "Are you hurt?"

"Unlike you, my pride's still intact." She grinned to ease his sudden alarm, then sat down in the chair just to one side of the couch and placed her foot on the coffee table, the bathrobe slipping away from either side of her leg as she revealed her bruised knee. "See, it's turning purple, just like yours did."

"I'm back to normal, thank you." Nick pushed himself up to a seated position then leaned forward, as if to examine her knee. "Does it hurt?"

"Only when I touch it."

"Like this?" Nick reached out and pushed lightly against the purple bruise with his finger.

"Ouch!"

With a frown, Natalie moved as if to cover her leg with her bathrobe, but Nick placed his hand over her own, saying, "Let me try something else. Tell me if this hurts." Then, very carefully, he leaned forward and kissed her knee. Turning his head, he asked, "Better?"

"Much better," agreed Natalie, as his hand slid down the length of her calf and then back again. She sighed as his fingers dug slightly into the skin, massaging the uninjured part of her leg. He shifted her leg carefully so that it rested across his lap, then began to work over the muscles in earnest, slowly, one at a time.

He got so into what he was doing that occasionally he'd forget the purplish bruise on her knee. Natalie found herself biting her lip, afraid that he'd stop, willing to endure the occasional twinges for the rest of the wonderful release her muscles were experiencing. It was like being wound tight and them allowed to wind down at her own pace, until her leg muscles felt about as shapeless as putty.

Nick finally caught her wince when he glanced up at her, his hands falling from her instantly. He bent his head forward and kissed the knee lightly again, saying sternly, "Nat, don't let me hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me." She reached out her hand to take his, then suddenly found herself swept into his arms, one arm beneath her knees—favoring the injured one—and the other behind her back and beneath her shoulder. "Oh, I think I'm beginning to *like* this recuperation thing, especially if I get to travel in style like this."

"I'll carry you anywhere you want to go," said Nick.

"Anywhere?" she teased. "What about work?"

"Right up the front steps and into the coroner's office."

"In a towel? What would Grace say?"

"Probably a lot less than if I lost the towel all together."

Natalie pressed her face against the skin of his shoulder. "I thought you were supposed to be recuperating."

"If there are any advantages to being a vampire, this is one of them," answered Nick, semi-seriously. "I'm fine now."

"I'll bet. Mind if I see for myself?" she asked skeptically.

"You're the doctor." Nick half-turned, Natalie still in his arms, as if looking for a place to set her down. "Now, where's your examining room?"

"That way." Natalie pointed down the hall.

Nick took a step in that direction, then paused. "I thought that was your bedroom."

"That's the place I usually play doctor."

"That's the place we want, then."

Natalie let her head loll back and enjoyed the brief trip down the hall. It had worked. Her plan had worked! She wasn't dead, Nick wasn't going to guilt his way out of their relationship or kill her . . . and she'd managed to guarantee herself—hopefully—at least a good five years of general uncertainty, with a future forecast of blustery and troubled times.

Not bad for a spur of the moment plan, she decided, as Nick carefully deposited her onto her bedspread. She scooted over, expecting him to lie down beside her, but he knelt down on the floor and crossed his arms atop the edge of the mattress, his head resting on them. "That knee doesn't look very good from here," he said seriously.

"Sez you." Suddenly self-conscious, Natalie sat up and pulled the flap of the bathrobe over her injured knee. "Who's the patient here, anyhow?"

"We'll take turns." Nick ran his fingers along her calf, brushing aside the bathrobe again as he worked his way from her ankle to her knees, then back again. Pushing up from the floor, he leaned across the mattress, still holding the length of her leg against him, the sole of her foot in his hand. "I think I should take a closer look at this."

"A serious look?" asked Natalie, turning her foot as he held it. "No tickling?"

"No tickling," promised Nick. His fingers closed over the arch of her foot, massaging gently, and Natalie sank down onto the mattress. At first she propped herself up on her elbows, but eventually allowed herself to fall back against the bed, content to close her eyes and enjoy the continuation of the massage Nick had begun in the living room. It was nice to be cared for, not having to think, just relaxing as his hands worked and reworked their way over and around the muscles in her lower legs and feet.

At least, that's the way it was at first. Each trip upward would reach just a little higher and each downward sweep would take a little longer, prolonging the return. She realized after a time that her eyes were open and that she was staring at the ceiling, her breath catching as Nick's hands wandered closer to her torso . . . then sighing in frustration as he worked his way down again.

A light slap against her right thigh got her attention. Leaning on one elbow, she glanced down at him. "Yes?"

"Just wondering if I was boring you."

"Boring—no. Frustrating the hell out of me—yes."

"Good." Nick grinned, then leaned down to plant a quick kiss on her injured knee as his hands returned to massaging that leg. "It's been a while; I want to memorize every inch of you and I've got a lot of ground left to cover."

Natalie took a long breath as his hand continued to moved upward along her inner thigh, right under her bathrobe. "You know . . . a girl could take a statement like that the wrong way."

"You're right, I should be more careful." The hand paused on its journey beneath her bathrobe and Nick met her eyes, his expression innocent. "Is there a wrong way to take this?"

Natalie shivered as his finger parted the folds of her flesh and trailed lightly upward. It left her, then returned, a second finger exerting equal pressure in its wake. But this time instead of departing, the fingers stayed in place, lightly rubbing the nub of flesh at the top of their arc with a slow and insistent pressure.

Nick's touch sent tingling sensations through her body. Natalie closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensations, nearly jumping when those skillful fingers left her . . . and their path was traced by Nick's tongue. She moaned as he continued to manipulate her, his touch sure and careful. Her fingers grasped at the pillow edges to either side of her head and her breathing grew more rapid and shallow, each wave increasing the tension in her body. The reaction, when she came, was a sudden spike of joy, followed by a lethargic feeling of warmth and contentment that washed over her.

She opened her eyes slowly, and smiled to find Nick lying on his side, watching her. He was lazily rubbing his palm up and down her thigh, his eyes filled with adoration and his lips curled around a grin that always meant he was pleased with himself for having found a way to please her.

"I enjoyed that," she whispered, reaching out a hand to tousle his hair.

"I thought you might."

He was *so* pleased with himself that she found herself feeling just a bit mischievous. Her intentions must have been written on her face, because when she announced, "Okay, now it's *my* turn," Nick's self-satisfied smile was replaced with a look of trepidation.

"That *was* your turn," he said defensively.

"Oh, no—I mean playing doctor. Now it's my turn." Rolling over, Natalie pushed herself up to her knees, uncaring that the belt to her bathrobe had slipped open and that it now revealed far more skin than it covered. Giving Nick's shoulder a push so that he was lying on his back, she scooted down to the towel that was still tied around his waist . . . although there was a defined 'tent' effect happening that was pushing the terrycloth to its limits. "I love unwrapping presents," admitted Natalie, slipping her fingers through the knotted towel and parting it easily.

The bath towel fell to either side. If Nick's erection wasn't quite at full mast, it was well on its way.

"What's your medical opinion, doctor?" asked Nick. He'd linked his fingers behind his head and lay there, grinning up at her.

"Well, considering I usually deal only with dead people, I think you're recovering nicely." Natalie gently ran a finger the length of his shaft and smiled to see it straighten further at her touch. "And so are you, you poor little guy. You know I didn't mean to hit you; you just happened to be in the way."

Nick cleared his throat. "I'd appreciate a little more respect, if you don't mind."

"Sorry." Natalie met Nick's gaze and tried to look apologetic, but, failing miserably, turned her attention back to his shaft. "You, too," she told it, giving the side of it a light pat and causing Nick to groan aloud. She brushed her fingers lightly across the base of his scrotum, which brought forth a groan for an entirely different reason, the skin retaining some of the warmth from the hot shower and slightly puckered from the length of time Nick had been exposed to the water. "Everything looks just fine," she announced. Leaning back on her heels, Natalie planted her palms flat on her thighs and grinned triumphantly at Nick. "Right as rain."

She managed to keep her smile in place even as his expression fell. "That's it?" he asked, obviously disappointed.

"Yep." Waving her hand toward the equipment in question, she added, "Looks fine to me."

"You don't want to take a closer look?"

Natalie hesitated, her knuckle to her lip as if considering the problem, then met Nick's gaze again with a doubtful expression. "Do you really think that's necessary?"

"There could be internal damage or . . . something."

"Hmmn." Natalie turned her gaze back to his groin again, still trying to maintain her clinical manner. She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe we could use a second opinion on this . . . ."

Nick sat up quickly. "No—I don't think so. I trust you. If you say it's fine, it's fine."

Unable to hold in her amusement any longer, Natalie planted a hand on his chest and, as he grinned in relief, pushed him back down on the bed. "Maybe I'd better take another look after all, just to be certain."

She slid her hand along his thigh as she leaned closer to his body—she

really *did* like his muscles—and placed her hand at the base of his shaft, circling it between the curve of her thumb and finger. His skin was still slightly damp from the shower and with some sweat, no doubt from his confinement in the towel. She thought momentarily of the baby oil in her medicine cabinet, but didn't want to run off and fetch it at this particular moment. Which brought up another problem . . . there were no condoms in her apartment. If things progressed as she expected them to, this particular bout of sex was apt to be more than a little unprotected.

The thought concerned her only for a second. Natalie removed her hand from the base of his shaft and lowered it to herself. There was more than enough lubrication present from Nick's version of 'playing doctor'—which certainly brought entirely different questions to her mind about his previous medical credentials—to help her ascertain if her knee-jerk reaction had left any lasting effects. A single swipe coated her fingers with enough lubrication for what she intended and she closed her fist around the base of Nick's shaft.

He moaned aloud at her first, slow stroke upward, his body almost rising off the bed to follow the movement of her fist. She varied the position of her hand, not only to please him but to keep her fingers from cramping, one time scraping lightly along the underside of his penis with the tips of her fingernails and the next giving the head a slight pressure as she pulled her fist completely over and past it.

That last sent a shudder through Nick's body that startled her and she glanced down at him, only to find his eyes were closed tightly, one hand clutching the mattress straight through the sheet and the other reached out in her direction, not too far from her foot. His mouth was slightly agape and there was a harsh note to his breathing but, thankfully, she saw no sign of fangs.

She tickled or caressed his scrotum with the fingers of her left hand, as she pumped with her right, which would elicit another occasional moan. Vaguely, she wondered if she could get another reaction like that shudder again and changed her tactic, concentrating on the sensitive skin on the underside of the penis and just beneath the head. His shaft grew as she stroked and caressed it, hardening and thickening, but although he shivered and moaned with delight, there was no shudder.

Faintly disappointed, Natalie was pretty much finished with her immediate creative options when she remembered what Nick had said about his recent bout of straying—fellatio. She'd offered to provide oral sex before, particularly the night of the reconciliation, but he'd backed off, telling her that he wouldn't be able to maintain his control. Since then she hadn't broached the subject, thinking that when he felt comfortable enough, he might be willing to try it again.

There was no time like the present. Planting one hand firmly on his thigh and the other at the base of his shaft, Natalie leaned forward and licked once across the head of his shaft. She took the head into her mouth for a second, sucked on it, and released it almost immediately.

The reaction was electric. Nick half-rose from the bed, the fingers of his right hand grasping her upper arm. Staring at her, he shook his head, his mouth open as if he were having difficulty breathing.

"Let me do this for you?" she asked him softly. "Please?"

After a moment, Nick nodded once, and sank slowly back down onto the bed, his hand slipping down her arm, fingers curling at her wrist as if in entreaty. Natalie entwined the fingers of her right hand with his own and supported her weight on that hand on the bed as she leaned over his thigh. She held the base of his shaft with her left had and contented herself with little licks up and down the length of his shaft, swirling her tongue around the head, and occasionally sucking on it. She'd never actually tried deep-throating before and doubted now was the time time to experiment, but varied her movements and technique based on Nick's reactions.

There was a certain sound that he made low in his throat, when she sucked on the head of his shaft, that sent chills down her spine. That particular maneuver became the punctuation to whatever series of touches she'd arranged—she'd never heard him make that sound and the thought that she could draw that from him thrilled her.

She knew that he wasn't too far from the brink when his hand pulled from hers and encircled her wrist. Natalie rose back on her knees and waited, then smiled as Nick held his hand out for her, drawing her down beside him. He kissed her as they lay side by side, wrapped in one another's arms, then gently pushed her over, onto her back. Slipping down her chest a little, he kissed her breasts and tongued her nipples, sending shivers through her, before locking his elbows and holding himself above her.

For once, there wasn't any fear in him. His eyes were perfectly blue, perfectly untroubled, perfectly full of love for her. Natalie threw her arms around his neck and pulled herself up to meet his lips, kissing him deeply.

"I've missed you so much," he told her, between kisses. "So much . . . ."

He slid inside her easily and Natalie arched her neck and back at the feel of him within her, his flesh against her own. A small tremor swept through her and she felt flushed in the aftermath of it, only to find that another began to build as soon as Nick moved within her. His first thrusts were hard and deep and fast, as he lifted her body to thrust down into her. He pounded into

her, all focus and concentration. Then he stopped, still inside her, and kissed her with such a feverish passion that she thought he might be near his climax.

Breaking the kiss, he positioned himself further back, drawing almost completely out of her with each stroke and then slowly entering her again. She panted with his thrusts, for even though she had felt him holding back his strength, trying to reign in the beast within him, those first blows were harder than she'd remembered ever having felt from him before, almost painfully so. The change in tactic soon triggered some sensual barrier within her, which gave way before she knew what was happening. She shouted something as he continued to thrust into her over and again, maybe his name, and stared up at him, paralyzed by the sudden surge of sensation through her body.

Nick paused to take her in his arms, again remaining within her, holding her even though her own limbs were still tingling and relatively useless. He kissed her mouth and her cheeks and her hair and her breasts and she vaguely thought she told him, "I love you, oh *god*, I love you," but she wasn't sure she said it or just thought it. She *was* conscious enough to remember him saying, "I love you," as he kissed her, murmuring it over and over like a private mantra.

His thrusts were quicker now, shallow then deep, and she recognized the change in rhythm—Nick was nearing his climax. Natalie thrust back at him now, wanting to share in his moment, wanting his body to feel even a part of the elation he'd given hers. In the midst of those hard, final thrusts, he leaned forward again, his lips meeting hers. Then, as if in a dream, he turned her head to one side and she felt his lips lightly brush along her neck.

Usually just after or during his climax she'd feel Nick's mouth against her neck, lips shut tightly to keep his teeth from biting her. This time, however, she felt a sharp, tearing pain, and then a pressure.

She made a sound, not a scream but some sort of cry that seemed to echo in her ears for an eternity. One of his hands held her head in place—to one side—while he continued to thrust into her. There was a pressure at her neck, insistent like the pull of a localized vacuum.

She'd made a mistake, she'd pushed him too far. Nick had lost control and was going to kill her.

She'd screwed up.

She was going to die.

It hurt. The first bite and the subsequent little shifts and tucks and tears hurt like hell—she couldn't tell just when or where they would happen. But between them . . . .

Ecstasy flooded through her like she'd never known before. Instead of reaching a climax and then dropping away, she kept rising and no matter how much pain the suction at her neck caused, the pleasure was almost too great to bear. She could feel her senses shutting down from overload, her hearing dissipating into a persistent buzzing, a form of white noise, then her eyes, when they were open, saw nothing but gray swirls. Her arms fell back from Nick, useless now, anyway, and she no longer felt his weight upon her or, after a time, the pain and pressure of his mouth and teeth at her throat. There was a sense of airiness, of floating, but beneath the skin her nerves still snapped and crackled with passion.

The white noise was interrupted by a long, passionate moan and she felt Nick's weight slump against her. Natalie closed her eyes and found she couldn't open them again—they were too heavy. She knew she should feel cold—blood loss did that to you—but she felt warm. It was like floating on her back in a still pool on a sunny summer day, the warm water lapping around her, comforting her. She smiled lazily, then opened her eyes when she realized that she was being shaken, jolted awake.

Annoyed, Natalie managed to get one eye open and found Nick staring down at her, frantic. His mouth was open . . . was he saying something? The world was still a bit hazy, maybe the sound had to come back—

"—Don't know what I—Nat, *please* say something? *please*! I couldn't stop it. I couldn't hold it back . . . ."

He ducked his head guiltily and she, somehow, raised her hand and ran it through his hair. She felt a sudden stillness come over him and for a moment she thought her hearing had gone again because there wasn't a sound . . . .

"*You're alive*!"

She winced at the loud cry and closed her eyes as he pulled her into his arms. Feebly attempting to push him back, Natalie finally contented herself with covering her face with her hands, although a number of his desperate kisses still got through her make-shift defensive shield. She was groggy and sleepy and still somewhat buzzed—it was like a hangover, with all of the disorientation and none of the headache.

"I'm sorry," Nick said, over and over again. "Nat, I'm so sorry—"

Natalie let him apologize for a few minutes, still trying to get her own senses together. At one point he brushed his lips against the wound on her neck and her very audible "Ow!" seemed to finally get through to both of them. Nick carefully lowered her back to the pillow and the bed, then sat there, watching her, a worried expression on his face.

She reached up and gently touched the spot on her neck, which still stung and was sore. "That hurt," she said, wincing again as she touched the spot. "That hurt a *lot*."

"I'm sorry—"

The fingers of her right hand curled over the bite mark on her neck. "I pushed you into this. You told me you didn't have any control . . . ." The buzzing in Natalie's head finally cleared long enough for her to manage two consecutive coherent thoughts and they formed an idea. She stared up at Nick, surprised. "You didn't kill me."

The fear was back in his eyes, darkening them. "I could have," he told her, voice heavy with self-loathing. He turned his gaze away, as if unable to look at her.

"But you *didn't*. You stopped. Nick, look at me, dammit!" she ordered, and he finally turned his gaze back to her. "You stopped. You took . . . how much *did* you take?"

"I don't know." He licked his lips, then ducked his head again when he realized what he was doing. "Maybe a little more than a pint. I could have drained you—"

"But you *didn't*," pressed Natalie. She grabbed hold of his arm and shook it. "Nick, you bit me and you drank from me . . . and you didn't kill me."

She saw it hit him; he sat bolt upright and took a deep breath, startled by the realization. "Janette's cure?" Nick turned back toward her and took her hand in his own. "That's it, isn't it? This is Janette's cure."

"Hold on—we don't know that. We know there were a lot of others factors involved."

"None of which either one of us want to repeat," he added, nodding slowly. "But Janette said—she said that when she was drinking from Robert, she suddenly stopped, long before she would have at any other time. That each time it happened, she took less and less, until she barely took any blood at all." He swallowed, holding Nat's gaze, the barest flicker of hope in his eyes. "Even if this isn't *the* cure, it could be a start."

"It could be," she agreed, squeezing his hand, supportive of his hope. "I'd like to talk to Janette before we get to far with this. She might know something and—" Natalie yawned, as a wave of weariness swept over her. "And . . . what was I saying?"

"That you should probably get some sleep."

"That wasn't it."

"It should have been." Rising from the bed, Nick pushed back the covers on the side closest to him and patted the bed sheet. "Roll over here."

Not feeling very much in the mood for an argument, Natalie did as he asked. Once she was on the bed sheet, he drew the covers over her. She had no idea exactly how much blood she'd lost, but she didn't feel it was enough to place her in immediate danger. In fact, it had been more along the lines of an impromptu blood donation. Sleep was a good idea, followed by liquids, particularly juices with a high natural sugar content when she awakened. She yawned again and had barely closed her eyes when she felt Nick kiss her lightly on the forehead.

"Sweet dreams."

"Noooo." Fighting herself back to wakefulness, Natalie forced her eyes open and frowned up at him, managing to catch his arm before he could leave. "You can't go. Your clothes—they're still in the dryer downstairs."

"I'll get them," promised Nick.

Natalie leaned on her elbows, still clasping his fingers with her own. "Not dressed like that, you won't! If you leave this apartment wearing nothing but a towel or my bathrobe . . . well, you'll scare Mrs. McCarthy half to death. She's called the cops on the postman twice this month already and he's been our regular mail carrier for at least a year."

"Hmmmn." Nick sat down on the bed, just as Natalie scooted to one side to make room for him. "What do you suggest? I don't want to wear out my welcome."

Natalie laid her head back down on the pillow, taking Nick's hand along with her. "Stay with me?"

"I was hoping you'd ask," he admitted, leaning down to kiss her gently. He drew back from the kiss for a moment, watching her. "If this *is* Janette's cure, you know what this could mean for us? Not only mortality, but a real life. Maybe . . . maybe children."

There was a sense of awe in his words, as if Nick were just beginning to understand the implications of what had happened between them. Natalie smiled and brought his hand to her lips. "A whole new set of problems, on top of the old ones," she answered, with a mock sigh.

"Speaking of which," Nick pushed lightly on the blanket beside her, "is there any room under there for me? It's getting cold out here."

"I think something can be arranged." Natalie slid back across the bed beneath the covers.

Before she could turn back to face him, Nick had slipped into bed beside her and wrapped his arms around her from behind. Natalie's eyelids were fluttering shut when she caught sight of a beam of moonlight striking the far wall. "That window faces East—the sun in the morning—"

Nick held her firmly in place, stopping her from turning. "I'll take care of it later. Go to sleep."

She felt secure with his arms around her. Snuggling back against him, Natalie asked, "Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Every chance I get from now on," he promised, kissing the hair lightly behind her ear. "Unless you hog the covers."

"You get your own covers," said Natalie crossly, but she still smiled to herself as their future together suddenly seemed much brighter.

"I'd prefer using yours, especially if you're in them."

"Maybe I'll share, then," she decided, with another yawn.

"Good."

She was just drifting off to sleep when she felt Nick kiss her hair again and heard him whisper, "Natalie, I think I've fallen hopelessly in love with you."

She wanted to tell him it wasn't hopeless, but when she opened her mouth she yawned. Nothing was *ever* hopeless . . . not where they were concerned. As long as there was hope, they had a future and nothing but their own fear could take that hope from them. Their future, from that point onward, would be entirely up to them.

Or . . . almost entirely.

It was just as well she drifted into darkness at that point, because Natalie found herself wondering what LaCroix would be like as a permanent mother-in-law.

Ophelia-5 makes her home in Paris, where she has kept a secluded Left Bank *salon* since the end of the Great War. Said by some to be the child of Harry Houdini and Mata Hari, by others a Hungarian orphan purchased from a sweatshop for a few *centimes* by a wealthy benefactor whose identity to this day remains unknown, Ophelia has had a suitably varied and veiled career. She has written slim volumes of poetry that Gertrude Stein called "fragrant, almost poisonous in their intensity, seeped in an erotic musk that—oh, sorry, gotta go, Pablo's here to paint my picture." Her career as a *chanteuse* and exotic dancer made her the toast of Paris for much of the 1930s, a legendary performer rivaled only by Edith Piaf and Josephine Baker. She does not talk of her time as a prisoner of the *Reich* during the Second World War, but her quiet acceptance of the *Legion d'Honneur,* an accolade reserved only for the likes of Charles de Gaulle and Jerry Lewis, speaks volumes. Since the war she has spent her time writing, doing anonymous charity work, and raising her half-dozen illegitimate, brilliant children. She does not avoid the glare of the spotlight that cannot help but shine upon one such as she, but neither does she court it; she merely *lives,* as she always has, creating art and, more crucially, *living* art. Ophelia5@geocities.com

Sadly, *Johnny Bago* passed away shortly after completing the illustrations for Ophelia's story cycle. He had been field-testing a mixed drink, the now-legendary Flaming Mountie, while reading the "Plaid Pages" version of *Last Knight,* and the mixture of comedy, alcohol, and (someone's) prescription drugs he happened to be taking at the time proved lethal. This came as no surprise to any of his many friends, acquaintances, admirers, and substance suppliers, and proved a happy accident for owners of his artwork, which has since skyrocketed in value. Undiscovered works of the unusually prolific and prescient artist continue to surface, and have proven to be an excellent investment, um, fine addition to the rapidly-growing media-art movement adding to the increasing legitimacy of a once-derided field. Johnny's final words, as he lay choking on his own vomit, perhaps say it best: *"I only wish I was taking that Kluge bitch with me."*